

NINE IDEAL INDIAN WOMEN

BY

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DEDICATED
BY GRACIOUS PERMISSION
TO
HER MAJESTY
QUEEN ALEXANDRA

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SATĪ

It was long, long ago, when the earth was young, that Daksha Prajapati (Maharajah of Daksha) reigned over a kingdom which stretched along the foot of the mighty Himalayas, and his capital stood on the river Ganges, where Hardwar now is. He was one of the richest and most powerful Maharajahs in Jambudwipa, the country now called India, and much respect was shown him by *devas* and kings because of his many lovely daughters. As each fair child grew to maidenhood Daksha Raj married her to a rich god, and thus his own influence increased, for who would dare offend the father-in-law of over a score of gods!

Now Sati, the youngest of this large family of girls, was the loveliest and from infancy had been her father's favourite, and she determined that she should make the best match of all, and he proudly watched her growing into the most beautiful, fairylike and exquisite maiden the world had ever seen. Ever and again, he thought over the qualities of all the eligible gods and kings but, while he thus dreamed and planned and pondered, Sati grew up with her ideal in her heart.

Rising up from the plains are the glorious, snowcapped Himalayan mountains, in ancient times the home of the gods. Far above all towered Kailash, the kingdom of Siva, the God of gods. Often in her childhood Sati gazed up at those silver peaks while she listened to her mother's tales of the worlds, of earth and air and sky, and the story little Sati loved best to hear was about Siva, the Destroyer and Regenerator of the living world. When the summer glory faded and trees stood brown and bare with their dead leaves lying round about them on the silent earth, Sati's pure, childish fancy understood that they died for Siva, because he willed to reinvigorate the earth, and when the sweet and playful *Vasanta* (Spring) flew forth over fields and hills

and clothed the world in tender, yellow green and red, Sati knew that it was Siva, the Lord of all, who willed it so

Thus from her babyhood this worship of Mahadeva grew in her heart and when she was a tiny child of five she clasped her henna tinted hands and cried aloud "Siva Mahadeva, I want to learn the real, perfect yoga (meditation), come, God and Lord, and teach me "

Her earnest cry reached the Lord of all, as He sat in Kailash upon His prayer rock and He descended swiftly to the kingdom of Daksha and taking the tiny girl upon His left knee taught her how to fix her mind upon the Truth, and Sati learned, and sitting there her soul and God's were as one and they rose in ecstasy into the air And often Mahideva came Years passed by and Sati was a young maiden She knew she could never pledge herself to any other for all her heart and soul and every fibre of her life for time and all eternity, were given to Siva the King of Kailash Bhairav

Daksha Raj heard of Sati's choice and was wrathful and cried in scorn 'What! Does my precious Sati wish to marry Siva, the beggar god! No, never shall I give consent to this "

When he called Siva a beggar, Daksha Raj spoke truly, for among all the gods there was none so poor as Mahadeva, who owned the whole creation but had nothing in it to call His own, for He had given all to others and had for Himself only an ox Upon this ox He rode round strange places, from which all men shrink in horror and disgust

The places which Siva loved to visit are called *shmathan* and here, when the mortal body is quitted, rich and poor, young and old, all leave their worldly desires, their bodies are burnt to ashes and in these ashes there is no difference These spots Siva chose as His favourite places to roam, and smeared His body with the ashes of the dead, and He counted these ashes as jewels, for it is only through the fires of suffering and portals of death and the flames of *shmathan* that souls can meet their God

Mahadeva was of great majesty Cobras formed a crown upon His head and from His shoulders hung a tiger's skin, and in His hands He held the

earth and skies and seas, and ruled over all Wondrous and farseeing were His triple eyes, for before His gaze the Present, Past and Future were ever clear

This was the ideal of Sati's pure soul and no persuasion could induce her to consent to any other suitor, so in the end Daksha Raj was obliged to yield and the marriage was celebrated, but Daksha Raj was vexed

After the ceremony Sati accompanied her husband to his home in Kailash in the north of the Himalayas, where Sumla now stands Sati lived up there, close to the eternal snows, and she was supremely happy Beautiful *vela* (creepers) covered the roof of her cottage The wonderful *rudraksha* trees touched and shaded the verandah Fruit trees grew near the house, and flowers were everywhere, and they bloomed all the year round The kingly mountain peaks were like sentinels guarding the beautiful Kailash Bhavan, some with their heads wrapped in fleecy clouds and others with snow helmets And when Surya, the Sun God, laid his touch on earth some looked like silver and some were deep sapphire, others purple, others emerald green and all were beautiful and spoke of God And the gems that studded the peaks of Kailash scintillated and sparkled and shone for Sati's delight Lovely, refreshing springs sprang to life in Kailash Bhavan and formed a wonderful lake on which floated the sweet *mandara* flowers, filling all the air with perfume

Near to the lake was the picturesque forest of Nandana where graceful deer grazed peacefully and splendid peacocks roamed Beyond the forest lay another lake Achchoda where pure white lotus floated, rivalling Sati in her fairness and she loved to see them there

Further away stood the great Mount Kakudman where Mahadeva's bull was horn and lived, and Sati loved to wander there and feed the lordly animal and listen to him bellowing in praise of Siva

Away to the west lay the Aruna Mountain full of precious herbs of gold and shining red under the wand of Surya, and further away the golden peaks of Sringavan tossed their heads in the air and tried to rival their majestic snow clad brother, Sarvoadah Sati loved to stand and watch them all and

the heaven born Ganges descending in her seven streams to water all the lands and Kingdoms of Jambu (India)

Into this beautiful Garden of Kailash no sorrow or trouble ever entered and the only sounds that wake the echoes there were the music of the water falls, the songs of birds, Sati's sweet, silver laughter and Siva at his devotions. He rose at break of dawn to say his prayers and chanted soft, sad melodies which Sati loved to hear. Such prayers are still chanted in India by devotees of Siva, when they rise as he did with the first streak of dawn and this day break worship of Siva is called *bhairabi* (one of the names of Siva)

Often Sati wandered hand in hand with Siva through the groves of *bacl* trees and, when again they reached the little flower embowered cottage, he often stopped beside the *champa* hedge and picked the fragrant yellow blossoms and twined them in her hair, and Sati in turn would gather the white *dhutura* flowers and weave a garland to crown her lord. (To this day the *dhutura* is Siva's special flower and is offered in the *pūja* to Mahadeva.)

In the mornings when Siva sat in silent meditation under the *rudrahsha* tree, Sati wandered in the woods alone. At times she called the gentle deer and played hide and seek with them among the trees of Nandana. Or else she would race the silver streams until they plunged downwards among the rocks and hid themselves. Then home she sped and called the butterflies to deck her walls and the pretty, winged ones forsook the flowers and covered the walls of Sati's hut with their gorgeous loveliness as if they would draw honey from her presence. And the flowers would long for Sati to come out again and often they would call to the birds. "Go, peep and see what our goddess is doing. Does she hold a court of butterflies?" Then all the birds would flutter round the cottage and trill and warble till Sati came out to scatter rice amongst them.

Siva is sometimes cold like snow, but Sati was the sun which melts him. Siva was the arid rock and Sati the spring that softens it. He is the kingly tree and she the creeper. He is the sun and she the softly reflecting, gentle moon.

Mahadeva said "Sati is my life and without her I should cease to be."

And Sati asked wonderingly "My Lord, how can I be your life when you are the Creator of all?"

Then he smiled and answered in his wonderful voice, which had in it the depth and melody of the onward flow of many waters "Sati, you are my life because you are my love. Without love there is no life, no creation. Where love is the soul lives, and when love is fled the life is broken, empty, cold and still."

When Indra, King of the Skies, loosed the clouds, they wrapped the peaks and valleys of Kailash in a cloak of grey mist. Then Siva would call Sati into the cave and there they would stay while the rains washed the mountains and plains of Jamhu.

This cave was hidden within the mountain and its entrance was sheltered by *deodar* (kingly trees). Grass covered the side of the hill and made a carpet to the mouth of the cave for Sati and Mahadeva to walk over. Within the cave, a dome shaped roof made it high and splendid, and though the sun and moon and stars never shone in there it was brilliant with light which emanated from its igneous rocks. In the heart of this majestic cave was a beautiful lake, and running along its sides were beds full of charming subterraneous plants, some golden, others silvery, and others delicate shades of coral, sapphire emeralds and other hues. Near the lake was a pond of *padma* flowers and close to the pond a palace of silver. In this enchanting palace Siva rested and meditated with Sati by his side, her lotus hand folded in prayer and her soul keeping pace with his, who was her husband, god and all.

Thus Sati's life was full of joy and happiness and she lived for her husband alone. They were such a contrast, he so massive, strong and majestic and she tender, loving and sweet!

Now, soon after the marriage of Siva and Sati, a moon named Bhrigoo held a *yagna* and all the gods and Maharajahs attended it. Daksha Raj was almost the last guest to arrive and, when he entered the *darbar* all stood up in his honour, save his son-in-law Mahadeva. Daksha Raj was furious at this insult and determined then and there to avenge himself.

Not long after he decided to have a *yagna* and chose Narad, the singing Saint, to be the hearer of his invitations. In those olden days all invitations were given by word of mouth.

Narad was charged to summon every god from heaven and all the kings and princes of earth. One only was to be omitted and he was Mahadeva.

The Singing Saint was a gossip and mischief-maker and that was why Daksha Raj chose him to carry the invitations. When he had a piece of news, Narad never rested till he had told every one, so he was impatient to get away to Kailash and tell Sati and Siva all about the *yagna* to which they were not bidden.

Of course, Siva, being the great God, knew all about everything that happened in the kingdom of his father-in-law and why Narad visited Kailash in such haste. Still, when the Singing moon touched his feet in homage Mahadeva asked kindly: "My son, Narad, what brings you here?"

Narad, bowing to the ground, asked after Siva's health, and then said: "Does my lord know that your father-in-law is having a big *yagna* and all the gods, saints, maharajahs and one and all in Jambu have been invited?"

Mahadeva was not at all surprised or ruffled by the news, but he asked Narad not to mention it to his little Sati. Narad was so anxious to tell Sati, too, that he darted off, pretending not to hear Siva's request. Sati was within, but when she heard the moon's voice she came out on to the verandah and stood at its edge, holding a branch of the *rudraksha* tree. Hurriedly Narad, the Singing Saint, came along and Sati, modestly drawing her *sari* over her face, asked him: "Are my dear parents well?"

Narad made a deep obeisance and said: "Mother Sati, they are well and your father is having a great *yagna* to which I am deputed to invite all the gods and kings."

"Indeed!" said Sati, "and I suppose you have come here to invite us. Of course we shall go."

But Narad behaved unlike any other messenger. Instead of repeating the formula of the invitation, he said awkwardly, "I must hurry away now; I have

so many places to go" and hastily departed

"And he never delivered the message" said Sati to herself, feeling rather puzzled at the moon's strange behaviour

Mahadeva had watched Narad go round to Sati's verandah but he did not attempt to stop him, with his third eyes fixed on the Future he knew all that was written. So he remained seated upon the tiger skin which covered the rock. And after Narad had departed Sati joined her husband there, and seating herself upon her left knee as was her wont, asked him "Have you heard that my father is going to have a big *yagna*? You and I shall go to it, shall we not?"

Mahadeva took her hand and answered gently "I have not been invited, because I am a poor son in law, and you cannot go because you are my wife"

Then he drew her thoughts to higher things and Sati forgot about her father's *yagna*

Some days later a procession of *palkis* arrived at Kailash Bhaban and out of them stepped Sati's many sisters, all gorgeously attired each wearing different coloured *sari* and gems. One shone with diamonds, another with emeralds and a third had chosen rich red rubies, while a fourth had milk white pearls encircling her throat and wrists and falling in ropes to her waist. Here gleamed the opal and there sapphire caught the light. One had fancied the blue of the turquoise and beside her walked another adorned with ornaments of *mounga* (coral) and gold. Following them were others as variously adorned and their dresses were as different as their jewels.

They greeted Sati in chorus "Dear little sister, what! you are not dressed and ready to go to father's *yagna*!"

"I am not going, sisters" Sati replied

"Not going!" they echoed "Father is having a *darbar* everyone is to be there and you, his child, say you are not going!"

"No" said Sati, "my husband is poor, so my father has not invited us. All of you are the wives of rich gods"

"Nonsense! Nonsense!" cried her sisters, "you must come, get ready"

"No", Sati replied, "I cannot go, for my father would be ashamed to see me there and I should not be able to bear hearing him say anything against my dear husband "

The sisters inferred that her real reason was that she had no jewelry, so they had a whispered consultation and then addressed her again "We shall each lend you a jewel and you will be adorned, little sister Now we shall go and speak to your husband about your coming with us "

Again Sati refused saying "Dear sisters, many thanks, but I am proud to be my husband's wife and if I go at all I shall go as his wife which would not be the case were I to wear your ornaments You are very kind but I cannot accept your suggestion "

The sisters, however, hurried off to ask Mahadeva to allow Sati to accompany them and found him sitting on the rock beneath a great *rudraksha* tree, in profound meditation They dared not disturb him but stood and watched him awhile, and noticed a large bag hanging on the branch of a tree near him One of the sisters opened it out of curiosity and the setting sun shone on its contents and all saw that the bag was full of valuable jewels and precious stones The sisters whispered to one another that perhaps, after all, Siva was not a poor god, and they hurried back to Sati and did all they could to persuade her to accompany them Sati remained firm in her refusal and at last the sisters went away without her

But after they had gone Sati sought her lord and spoke to him sweetly and pleadingly, saying "My God and lord, will you permit me to attend my father's *yagna* ? "

Siva turned and tenderly folded her in his embrace and, stroking the pretty head, asked gently "My little wife, how can you go when we have not been invited? It is not customary to attend a large gathering like that without an invitation "

Sati lovingly addressed him and answered "Oh, Siva, I am my father's child and surely we need not stand on ceremony I want very much to go Do let me "

Her husband replied : "I do not wish you to go, Sati. Your father is ashamed of your marriage and it will be better to remain away, especially as we have received no invitation. Change your mind, my little *protima*, and stay with me."

But Sati shook her pretty head and continued to urge : "It will look so strange if I am not there for all my sisters will be present. Do say yes."

Mahadeva answered gravely : "Your sisters are the wives of rich husbands and were all invited. We are poor and have been left out. Dear one, why go?"

"Lord and master of my heart!" she implored, looking her sweetest, "I am not ashamed of being a poor god's wife and there is no happier wife than I. It is just to prove how proud I am of you, my husband, that I wish to go. Do let me."

"Well, little wife," Siva answered, "as you wish it I shall say no more, but I am not anxious for you to go. And you must go as my wife, not as your father's daughter. I shall ask my disciples, Nandi and Bhiringi, to escort you."

Nandi and Bhiringi came and in obedience to Siva's command they culled all the choicest flowers of Kailash Bhavan and wove them into a crown and into necklaces, bangles and every imaginable ornament. Next morning dressed in these *phul-ka-gaina* (flower jewels) Sati looked perfectly lovely.

She thought her beloved Siva gazed at her rather sadly, so she smiled at him brightly and said : "I shall not be away long". Then she fell before him with reverence and asked his blessing, and touching his feet gracefully with her clasped hands she rose and walked towards the ox, which was ready for her.

Siva lifted her on to the animal's back, saying as he did so : "My little Sati, you are taking from me the perfume and light of Kailash."

Sati blushed at the sweet compliment and answered : "Beloved, I shall not stay there long."

Mahadeva replied with great earnestness : "You are leaving me alone and I cannot live without you, my precious little *protima*."

Then he gave her into the charge of the faithful disciples and watched the little procession descend the hill. When Siva turned back to their cottage, Kailash Bhāvan seemed a different place. What flowers were left were all drooping. The birds had ceased their singing. The peacocks cried uneasily. The timid deer had sought the shelter of the trees, for all looked gloomy and portentous. The sun had disappeared behind a great dark cloud. Mahadeva understood these dismal omens, and sighing sadly, he seated himself upon the rock under the tree, whose leaves quivered tremulously as if they sorrowed at the tale they had to tell him of the doings of mankind. And Siva sat with closed eyes and meditated.

As Sati rode along the hills, Kuber, the god of riches, saw and recognised her, and running up to the mountain-side he knelt down before her, and asked reverently if he and his wife might be kindly allowed to dress her, their goddess-queen, for the yagna. His wife had followed him and joined her entreaties to his, saying: "Mother Sati, my husband is the god of riches but all his treasures are of no value if he cannot adorn you with his jewels."

Sati answered sweetly: "It is a pleasure to me to make my children happy, for I love them. Do as you wish."

So Kuber with his wife brought out the most beautiful of their treasures, and adorned goddess Sati with rare and wonderful cloth of gold and brilliant jewels. Nandi and Bhiringi, danced with joy to see their queen dressed as became her rank.

Just as Sati was about to resume her journey Kuber stood before her with folded hands and asked another favour: "Mother Sati, may I complete your attire?"

"Why", laughed Sati, "what is wanting? I thought your wife had dressed me perfectly."

"Just one thing," said Kuber, "and that is the adornment of your feet." And he produced two full blown lotuses and kneeling before Sati, fastened one on each dainty foot. Then rising he bowed profoundly and said: "Now,



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Mother Sati, you are perfect, and I, your devoted servant, have had the pleasure of putting the finishing touch to your costume."

Sati laughed her sweet happy laugh and, blessing Kuher and his wife with her choicest blessings, she left them.

The grand palace of Daksha Raj was full of guests. Gods, Maharajahs, saints and sages mingled together and awaited the *yagna*. The palace stood on the Ganges and the portion of the river near it was called Nildhara, or Blue river. In the near distance were the picturesque hills and further away, gleaming against the blue sky were the snow-mountains of Himalaya, shining like silver in bright sunshine.

The capital of Daksha Raj was a wonderful place, built all of stone, and the remains of paved streets, still to be seen, speak of its ancient splendour. The palace was a fine building, with verandahs and terraces, and immense courtyard separated the different portions of the palace. In the outer courtyard *durbars* were always held and it was now fitly adorned and prepared for the great prayer-meeting. Everything was so magnificent and costly that thousands of guests were eloquent with admiration.

Daksha Raj walked in and out fully satisfied with himself. He felt sure that this *yagna* would teach his son-in-law, Siva, a lesson, so that he would never dare to insult him again.

Daksha Rani was not in her husband's confidence, so when many daughters arrived and she learned from them that her youngest and favourite child would not be present, she was dismayed and unhappy and continued to ask the reason of Sati's absence. One day when she was again asking if there was no chance of Sati's coming, they saw a radiant figure, riding upon an ox, enter the palace gate. She immediately knew that this was Sati and hastened forward to greet her, saying: "My child, my sweet Sati! Why are you so late? How lovely you look and what costly jewels you are wearing."

The delighted mother fussed so much over Sati that the other daughters got jealous, and were furious because their mother made so much of their youngest sister. They had received no such welcome! Next, they discovered

that Sati, the poor god's wife, outshone them in dress and jewels. Then they remembered that Sati had not been invited to the *yagna* and quickly decided that it was their duty to inform their father that she had arrived.

When his daughters stood before him in a body and informed him of Sati's unwelcome presence, Daksha Raj nearly choked with rage.

"What!" he cried, "Sati here! She shall not remain very long. How dare she come when they were not invited? No wife with any self respect goes where her husband is ignored. I shall have nothing to do with Siva, the Beggar God, and as Sati is his wife she must leave my palace at once."

So he commanded his youngest daughter to appear before him in the *darbar*. The thrones and seats of the various guests were arranged according to their ranks and thousands of eyes watched Sati as she walked past all to her father's throne in the centre. Her *ghomta* (veil) hung over her face, but it could not conceal the grace and radiance of the little figure, so calm and serene. The admiration she excited, and her rich apparel and jewels, still further incensed her irate father and when she reached the steps of his throne he shouted aloud at her in his rage, expressing his surprise that she had dared to come uninvited to his *yagna*, upbraiding her for her marriage and abusing Siva as insultingly as he could.

While the torrent of his anger poured forth Sati stood patiently listening with her head bowed and hands clasped together as if in prayer. When he ceased, she raised her head and answered him, the clear notes of her voice resounding through the *Darbar*.

"Father, why have you so abused my husband? Do you forget he is Mahadeva? It is true he is a beggar, but he begs for love, the love of his children. It is their love alone that he cares for." She paused awhile and then continued, "I am sorry for you, my father, but your words are unpardonable. The tongue that speaks against my husband is not fit to belong to a human brain. The head that contains that tongue shall become that of an animal."

Before the astonished eyes of the assembly, the head of Daksha Raj

changed its shape and a goat-headed monarch sat upon the gorgeous throne, but none heeded him, for Sati's voice held them spell bound.

"For myself", she cried in a voice of thrilling anguish, "I no longer care to live. I should always be known as the daughter of him who abused his God my beloved Mahadeva!" The last three words floated through the hall like a soft whisper of love. All who heard the rapture of adoration and worship, as she named Siva with his title 'God of all gods,' felt their souls filled with a conception of his majesty, and bowed their heads in reverent homage, till Sati's silvery voice recalled them to earth.

She had fallen upon her knees, with hands clasped together and upturned eyes, she prayed aloud: "O Siva, my husband, why did I come here against your wish! Siva my God! I cannot bear to live since my father has abused you. Yam, kind king of death, hasten your steps and bear me hence!" Sinking down with hands still clasped and upstretched arms, she cried: "Mahadeva, my God, my husband, forgive me! My last thought is of you, my lord, my master and my last prayer is, do not forget your little Sati!"

The piercingly sweet voice died away and a deep awe filled the assembly. A shining star appeared on the forehead of Sati, and when at last some ventured to come near they found that her soul had fled. Still, none dared touch the beautiful and fragrant form. The gods trembled with fear of Siva's wrath, and kings and princes, saints and sages fled from the *darbar* in disorder.

Nandi and Bhringi sadly returned home. They knew not how to tell Siva that the goddess-queen of Kailash was no more. When they reached the Bhahan the Great God still sat upon the rock in meditation under the tree. Nandi cried aloud: "Oh goddess Sati, where art thou? where art thou?"

The dreadful wail of grief reached the ears of Siva and he slowly opened his eyes. Nandi and Bhringi prostrated themselves before him, weeping "Our Mother! Our Mother!"

Siva rose from his seat and descended from the rock, but his whole frame trembled. He walked towards Nandi and asked him what he meant. Kneeling before him they breathlessly told him of all that had happened. Then they

heheld their beloved Mahadeva as they had never before known him and they were terrified at his awful aspect. Transformed with grief, Siva tossed back his flowing locks. His three eyes blazed with red fires. The cobras which formed his crown writhed and swelled, hissing angrily and spreading wide their hoods. Turning his majestic frame rapidly north, south, east and west, Siva shouted in a voice of thunder: "I have lost my Sati! All ye elements! Thunder, Lightning, Storm, Rain and Earthquake! Hear my word! Come! help me, destroy the world." And at his call all the spirits of the elements appeared and fell before him in homage and obedience.

Then with his *trishul* (trident) in his right hand, Siva strode down the mountains to Daksha Raj's kingdom. At each stride he took, the earth rocked and trembled, thunder rolled through the skies and the lightning darted, flashed and fell, the mountains became enveloped in mist and rain fell in torrents. The enraged god entered the *darbar* hall and called aloud: "Where are you, my Sati? I have come, speak to me."

His deep voice thrilled all who heard him and filled the now darkened hall, where between the massive pillars the lightning flashed and played. No answer came and once again the awful voice shouted "Sati, where are you?"

Then a figure came forward, piteously, trying in vain to speak. It was Daksha Prajapati, now the goat-headed king! Siva paid no heed to him. The distraught god had seen the motionless form of his wife sitting before the throne. He strode to her and bending over her cried in a voice of grief which shook the palace and struck terror into all hearts: "Speak, my little Sati!"

The silent figure sat there as if in meditation. In Siva's grief he thought of her only in her mortality and the ever living soul of Sati, which had so often met his in meditation and communion, was now separated from him. In an agony of despair and sorrow he caught up the fair, lifeless form of her beloved, and threw it across his left shoulder, holding the lotus-adorned feet in his left hand. The body hung across his back with the head hanging downwards and the luxuriant, glossy hair sweeping the ground. Then Siva strode from the palace of Daksha Raj, crying: Sati, you were mine, you are mine, you shall

he mine for ever," and leaping across the plain, from hill to hill, from mountain to mountain, over rivers and streams he went rushing on through the world, and ever as he went the elements of Nature followed him and the whole earth rocked and writhed and rent under the terrible grief of the God of gods, who now appeared only in his character of the Destroyer.

All the gods in heaven beheld the awful sight and trembled for the fate of the world. One alone could save it from the wrath of Siva, and he was Vishnu, the Life-Giver.

Then the *devas* consulted together and determined to beseech Vishnu to stop the annihilation of the world. They knelt before him and told him all, and when their prayers were heard, Vishnu, merciful God of Life, caught up his faithful companion, *Sudarshan*, and enveloped in invisibility, flew through the air and followed Siva in his mad flight of destroying grief. And as they flew, Vishnu spun *Sudarshan* round and round, and the disc knew its work and twirled its sharp blades intelligently and cut the body of Sati into little pieces and these little pieces fell all over *Jamhudwipa* as the gods flew on and on over the world.

Wherever a piece of Goddess Sati's body fell the ground became holy and pilgrimages were made to the spot, and, to this day, temples of Siva may be found in various places throughout the length and breadth of India. The eyes fell on a rock in the Himalayas beside a sacred lake and from them sprang to life a new goddess, who is known as *Nayani* (Eyes) and the lake and spot have since been deemed more holy than before, and the place is *Naini Tal*, a hill station in Kumaon. Another of these temples is at *Kalighat*, near Calcutta, where a finger fell, and thousands of pilgrims flock there every year.

Thus Vishnu, with his *Sudarshan*, saved the earth. And as the lifeless body ceased to burden him, Siva's rage cooled, and presently he became aware that the mortal Sati was gone. Then his soul re-asserted itself and subdued his senses, but he felt that the world was black without his Sati. He chose a cave in the Himalayas and here he lived the life of a *Yogi* (hermit) and all his meditations were on eternal love and in spirit he was again united with the soul of Sati and he said: "I loved my Sati in her mortal body but it is the

soul which lives Sati's love for me was eternal and thus she forsook her material body to be with me eternally Soul to soul, we still belong to and love each other Love begat the creation Love keeps the world alive, for love is life and without love all is utter desolation The love of creatures is given as a ladder to the love of the Creator Henceforth and for ever, my Sati shall be to mankind the Spirit of pure and undying love, that wonderful bond which unites two souls in life and beyond the bars of death, even unto the realms of Eternity '



SUNITY

In ancient India, there lived a religious Maharajah named Dharmabrata. His kingdom was in Upper India, by the river Jumna. Small in size the State was, but it had a most kind and generous ruler. There was little sickness or sorrow in the kingdom, and what there was did not linger there, for the Maharajah was always eager to help those in trouble, and treated his subjects as if they were his children.

Temples were found everywhere, and Dharmabrata was so religious that his State resembled a *topoban*, and the people had *pujas* and *parbans* all the year round. All who visited the kingdom remarked on the peacefulness of the country, and Dharmabrata, though a Maharajah, was a saint.

(*Dharmabrata* means that religion was his object, and the Maharajah's life and deeds proved that he was worthy of the name he bore.)

Though the country was happy and peaceful, there was one thing needed, the want of which troubled the Maharajah's subjects and relations. He was much loved by his people, and they were anxious for him to have an heir. After some years, the Maharani told him, one morning, that she had had a dream that the god Vishnu spoke to her and said, "My child, I am pleased with you both, and you shall have a beautiful child." True enough it was, for a few months later she became the mother of a lovely little daughter, who was named Sunity.

When Sunity was quite a child, an unknown sage came to her father's court, and, noticing the form of a lotus flower shadowed in the pupils of her eyes, prophesied that she would be a great queen and that her name would live for ever in the world. The King and Queen were, naturally, delighted with the fortune-teller, and promised him a handsome reward if his augury came true. The mystic smiled and disappeared, and was never seen nor heard of again, in the kingdom of Dharmabrata Maharajah.

soul which lives Sati's love for me was eternal and thus she forsook her material body to be with me eternally Soul to soul, we still belong to and love each other Love begat the creation Love keeps the world alive, for love is life and without love all is utter desolation The love of creatures is given as a ladder to the love of the Creator Henceforth and for ever, my Sati shall be to mankind the Spirit of pure and undying love, that wonderful bond which unites two souls in life and beyond the bars of death, even unto the realms of Eternity "



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Princess Sunity grew up a picture of loveliness, and her sweetness of character was even greater than her beauty. When she was about sixteen, the fame of her loveliness went far and wide, but her parents were in no haste to get her married, for it was the dream of their lives that their loved child should never leave them. They hoped that she would become the wife of a prince who would live at their court and be to them a son, for King Dharmabrata wished his daughter to reign after him. But Sunity's life was otherwise decreed.

By the river Jumna, there was another kingdom, where reigned a young Maharajah named Uthanpad. There was none to equal him in looks, knowledge, accomplishments and sports, in all of which he was distinguished. But he was unmarried and gave his people to understand that, until he found a worthy consort, he would not marry, and no lady had yet met with his approval.

Ambassadors were deputed to visit every court, and in each to ascertain what the marriageable princesses were like. The envoys travelled from one kingdom to another, but so fastidious were they, on Uthanpad's behalf, that none of the many fair maidens they heard of pleased them. It seemed to these anxious delegates that they would never find a lady to equal their liege lord, and they were in this despondent mood when they arrived at the court of Dharmabrata Maharajah.

Wondering if they were to be disappointed again, they began to ask questions about the King's daughter. The descriptions of her beauty, disposition, attainments and accomplishments made them wish to see the Princess. "Surely, surely," they said to one another, "we have come to the right place, at last," for it seemed as though they had found one worthy of their Prince.

Accordingly, they presented themselves at the *darbar*, and intimated to the Maharajah that they had come to supplicate the hand of the *Princess Kamuri* for their young Ruler.

Dharmabrata replied: "It is an unexpected honour to me that so great a Maharajah as Uthanpad should think of a union with my house. But is it to any purpose that you should see my daughter? Your young King will want a

wife to be his Queen Consort, and, as I have no son my daughter will reign here, after me "

The amhassadors returned, disappointed, to their own country But all that they related of what they had heard of the young Princess Sunity convinced the ministers and court advisers that this lovely Princess was their Heaven designed queen, though none had seen her ' Uthanpad's imagination was awakened, by the descriptions of her and he bade his envoys go again to the court of Dharmahrata Maharajah and endeavour to obtain a glimpse of this pearl of maidens

They obeyed the royal behest and after many interviews Sunity's father consented to let them see his lovely daughter at the next morning's *darbar* Morning found them at the temple of Vishnu, where they gathered to worship their family god before the sun rose Flowers, sandalwood and incense were plentiful, conch shells were blown, and offerings, on golden plates, filled the temple, and the Maharajah, the Maharani and the young Princess knelt, with clasped hands, before the image of their god

When the *pūja* was over, the Maharajah went to the *darbar* and sat on his golden throne The amhassadors had been conducted to their seats, and an unusually large assembly was gathered, for the object of the embassy was well known, and everyone was proud and pleased at the thought of such a great alliance for their loved Princess

After a few courteous words to his guests, the Maharajah made a page request the *Raj Kumari* to come to the *darbar* A wave of breathless expectation filled the court, for now the honour of both kingdoms was at stake The envoys, having gone thus far would find it difficult to excuse themselves if the Princess' appearance did not please them and, on the other side, if Dharmabrata Maharajah refused to give his daughter's hand, his action would be an open insult to Uthanpad

In the intense silence that such consideration evoked, Sunity entered Responding to her father's message, with child-like obedience and simplicity, she had come straight to the *darbar* clad in a blue silk *sari*, and looking like

a rare flower, she glided to the foot of the throne. The gold border of her sari blended artistically with its rich texture, while the clinging folds of soft silk hid and revealed the beauty of her maiden form. Her head was slightly bent, and the delicate, high-bred face looked somewhat serious and the tremulous lips betrayed that the facing of so many eyes was an ordeal to her. Clustering silken curls had escaped from under the edge of her sari, and kissed the fair forehead, in the centre of which shone a small bright red spot, placed there during *pūja*, which seemed to the admiring gaze, of all who beheld her, like the evening star in a peaceful sky. The luxuriant masses of her unbound hair fell in rippling waves, almost to the floor, and looked like a black mantle against the sheen of her silken sari. Costly rubies and pearls clasped her beautiful neck and wrists, and the tiny gold bells on her anklets made a delightful tinkle, as she walked forward.

When she reached the throne, the Princess sank gracefully on her knees, and, touching the ground with her forehead, did homage to her father, the King. Then, rising, she placed her small and shapely hands together, the tapering finger-tips pointing upwards, and, bowing low, saluted the assembly, and then her musical voice addressed her father:

"Father Maharaj, I await your commands."

Uthanpad's ambassadors thrilled, at the first glance they had of the lovely Princess, and, as she approached the throne, they were enraptured. Lost in admiration of her beauty, they forgot where they were, and, with one accord, sprang to their feet.

Dharmabrata Maharajah noticed their excited and unaffected tribute to his daughter's beauty, and the thought of parting from her weighted his voice with love, as he answered:

"My precious little girl, some friends here were anxious to see you."

Sunity blushed, and the rosy wave which suffused her face enhanced her bewitching loveliness. She again did homage to her father, bowed to the *durbar* and slowly, with hands clasped, retreated backwards from the *darbar* every again a poem of grace, and disappeared through an alcove.

"Sire," said the chief of Uthanpad's delegates, "we humbly beg your pardon for rising without your august permission, but the Princess's surpassing loveliness so charmed us that we forgot ourselves, and longed to hasten to our King and tell him that the jewel which adorns your court is indeed a priceless pearl."

The Maharajah answered, courteously

"You honour me with such praise. My little daughter is often called 'Mother Lakshmi', because she has brought such good fortune to our kingdom."

After a ceremonious leave-taking, the envoys hastened back to Uthanpad, who, charmed by the description they gave him of Princess Sunity, determined to judge for himself. He sent another ambassador to Maharajah Dharmabrat, asking permission to come, in person, to solicit the hand of the *Raj Kumari*. Sunity's father gave a cordial consent, though his heart was sad at the prospect of parting from his only child.

Uthanpad arrived at the kingdom of Dharmabrat with a small retinue, and, from the moment of his arrival, showed such eagerness to see the "Lady Lakshmi" Princess that the Maharajah and Maharani decided that they had better let the meeting take place that evening.

The Maharani dressed her daughter with her own hands, choosing a simple *sari* of pale green, with ornaments of emeralds and diamonds, and, kissing the sweet face, with maternal pride and tenderness, sent Sunity to her father, hoping and half-fearing, she knew not why, that the girl's pure fancy would be impressed with the handsome appearance of the young King.

It was just after sun set, and the Maharajahs sat in an open courtyard in the twilight on raised seats. Sunity, attended by her maidens, came and gracefully did homage to her royal Sire and his guest, then, with clasped hands, stood before her father, who immediately engaged her in conversation. As she answered him, her face broke into a lovely, dimpled smile, and Uthanpad was enraptured with her beauty. He thought her voice was the sweetest music he had ever heard, and that her face framed in the silken *sari* was like a pure white lotus floating in a lake of limpid green water.

When Sunity had left them, Uthanpad turned to his host, exclaiming "I have never seen anyone so lovely" and begged Dharinabrata Maharajah to give this treasure to him, and thus make him the richest husband. The Maharajah answered quietly, that his daughter was 'the luck of the State' and that he was reluctant to part with her. But Uthanpad pleaded his love and promised that Sunity's parents might visit her as often as they wished.

Finally, the marriage was arranged and Uthanpad returned to his own kingdom, to prepare for the reception of the bride. When the eventful day arrived, he came back with a noble escort and all the insignia of his high rank, to wed the lady of his heart, bringing with him costly jewels and gifts and a wonderful pearl necklace which was a family heirloom.

The marriage was celebrated with unusual brilliance and when the ceremony was over, Uthanpad thought himself the luckiest man on earth. As soon as he found himself alone with his bride, he took the exquisite pearls from their golden casket and placed them round her neck, saying

"My lovely wife, these pearls are a family relic and my mother gave them to me on her death bed, and her last words were, 'Son, marry one as pure as these pearls.' Sweet little bride, there is none other but you who could wear them."

Sunity's face flushed with happiness at his praise. She touched his feet and as Uthanpad lifted her up, she whispered shyly

"My husband and King, may I always be worthy of your love and these beautiful pearls."

On the following day, the time of departure came, and, one by one, the Princess said goodbye to all the friends of her happy childhood's home. She bade farewell to her parents, touching their feet, in her pretty, graceful way, shedding sad tears, and saying

"Beloved father and mother, I shall try and prove myself a true daughter by ever remembering all you have taught me. May our god, Vishnu, guide me, in my new home, as he has guided me here all my life."

Her parents, seeing her happy in her love, and Uthanpad so proud of her,

hid their own sadness at the parting, but their hearts were heavy, for they had a presentiment that they would never again see their dear child.

Her father's farewell words were .

"Be as unselfish a wife as you have been a daughter, and Vishnu will bless you."

Thus they parted, and all Dharmabrata's kingdom wept over her departure.

Uthanpad's capital was brilliantly illuminated to welcome him back with his bride, and he held a great *darbar*, to introduce her to his people. To celebrate her coronation as his Queen-Consort, there were many festivities. Rewards and distinctions were given to court nobles and officers, the poor were clothed and fed and prisoners released, and the name of Sunity was hailed everywhere with joy, for her advent to her new country brought happiness and good fortune to Uthanpad's subjects. The young Maharani devoted herself to her husband's Raj, and every one loved her. Uthanpad lost himself in the ocean of her love, and two golden years passed away.

Then came a gradual change. There was no heir-presumptive to the throne, for Uthanpad was the last of his race, so the elders of the court were anxious to see their Chief a father. The first whispers of disappointment grew louder and louder, until a black cloud of gloom seemed to pervade the kingdom, and a day came, when, in the *darbar*, the aged ministers spoke to the King.

Uthanpad's love for Sunity had never waned, and the discontent and murmuring of his subjects, because there was no heir, came as a shock to him, but his duty as a King led him to sympathise with his people. Sunity noticed that some trouble weighed on her lord, and soon the rumours of the subjects' dissatisfaction reached her. Often had she grieved, in secret, that motherhood was denied her, and now the knowledge that this was the cause of the gloom, which sometimes clouded Uthanpad's brow, hurt her deeply. But she faced the difficulty as only a brave and self-annegating woman could, and, remembering her father's last wish that she should be an unselfish wife, determined to help both the King and the State.

No sooner had she taken this resolution than she carried out her purpose. When Uthanpad joined her, in the evening, she seated herself at his feet and said, gently and very sweetly

"My lord, my husband, you love me, I know, but a King must live for his people more than for his wife and, my husband, I wish you to think of your subjects "

Uthanpad did not grasp her meaning, so, kneeling by his side, she kissed his hands and said, bravely

"You see, beloved, we have no heir. You must marry another wife "

"Sunity! my Sunity!" exclaimed her husband, "do you no longer love me?"

The sharpness of his tone cut her to the quick. Poor Sunity! her love for her husband was so great that she was willing to share his heart with another, and immolate herself in serving him, and he asked her if she no longer loved him!

"My lord!" she answered very tenderly, "you will ever be the centre of my life, my all in all, whether you marry other wives or not. Nothing will ever change my love for you, but you must think of your people and of your dynasty "

Uthanpad looked at her, in wonder. "My Sunity," he said, "you are so beautiful in mind and heart! You should have married a *deva* "

"Why! my husband, you are the *deva* of all *devas* to me," she answered proudly

Uthanpad drew her into his strong embrace, telling her he worshipped her for her sweet unselfishness, and that she was the only woman in the world for him. Sunity often spoke to him of the subject, and begged him to marry again, and often he refused, and looked vexed at the proposal. But, in the end, after a great deal of persuasion, and because of the anxiety of his subjects, he consented to marry a second wife

The ministers soon heard of a handsome young princess, in a small kingdom, and the customary marriage offering, a cocoanut, was sent and accepted

Queen Sunity supervised all the preparations for the marriage, and welcomed the bride to her new home

There was a great contrast between Uthanpad's two wives. Sunity was small, and delicately-built, with dainty hands and feet, a rosebud mouth, soft, black eyes and long, silky, curling eye lashes. Her voice was low and musical, and her every action gentle and refined. Everyone adored her, for her generosity and charity had won all hearts, and her intelligence made her opinion esteemed in the State Councils, and the Maharajah sought her advice on all matters.

Suruchi, the new wife, was tall, well built, handsome, and all energy and fire. Her sparkling black eyes were always full of mischief. She loved everything that spoke of life, and disliked Councils and serious discussions.

Now, in India, a bride receives a trousseau in her new home, as well as from her mother, and Sunity had been lavish in her preparation of beautiful clothes and jewels for her *sapatni* (co wife). Suruchi delighted to array her striking figure in the bright, rich silks, and to adorn herself with the costly jewellery, and her brilliance and gaiety struck an unknown chord in Uthanpad's heart, and soon he was fascinated by his second wife.

Suruchi was quick to perceive the impression she had made on her husband and, young as she was, neglected no art by which she could further attract him. Her one ambition was to gain the first place in Uthanpad's affections and palace. But her imperiousness made her disliked by servants and subjects, and the ministers and courtiers came to regret that they had ever favoured a second marriage. As time passed on, Suruchi took no pains to conceal her jealousy of the Maharajah, who, infatuated with her fresh and spirited beauty, indulged her slightest whim.

The popularity of the elder Maharami was a thorn in the flower of Suruchi's happiness, and she thought that, unless Sunity was removed from the palace, life would not be worth living. She began with half-veiled comments about her *sapatni* to the Maharajah, and grew bolder as he appeared not to notice them. But one day he reproved her, saying

"You are still very young, Suruchi, and I think you misunderstand Sunity. I know for certain that she is really fond of you, and there is none like her."

This praise added fresh fuel to the smouldering fire of jealousy in the younger Queen's heart, and she determined that she would effect the banishment of her sister-wife.

Late, one afternoon, the Maharajah came to his favourite's room, as was his wont. She was gorgeously dressed, as usual, and the brightness of her apparel and face cheered him, for he was fagged and worried with the burdens of State. He threw himself upon a golden lounge and, drawing Suruchi down beside him, he fondled the beautiful, proud face and said:

"My loved one, there is nothing I would not give you."

The jealous girl knew that her hour of triumph had come, and she pouted.

"Why! my Suruchi," asked Uthanpad, looking adoringly into the rebellious face, "what has vexed you?"

"Oh, I cannot explain to you!" the spoiled beauty replied, affecting a sadness which she did not feel, "but I am returning to my father's house."

Uthanpad was horrified at the suggestion and, when he found his voice, he asked, in an amazed tone, what had happened, and implored her to tell him everything. Suruchi saw that her threat of leaving his roof had unnerved him, and she thought it best to plunge boldly into the reason of her discontent.

"What is the good of remaining here?" she said, mournfully. "I cannot prove my devotion to you. *Sapatni* is everything, and if I venture to say a word you immediately stop me. She is like a bright sun in your kingdom, and I am but a poor little rush-light. No one cares for me, and I am absolutely miserable." With these words, she hid her face in her hands and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Sweet wife, beautiful one," and Uthanpad folded her in his arms with such passion that a thrill of triumph passed through Suruchi, which she quickly changed into a quiver of grief. "You must not go," he said, "you shall not



leave me. There is some misunderstanding, but I shall set it right. Sunity loves you, and she will do anything for our happiness."

"Sunity loves me!" echoed Suruchi, scornfully. "There you are, again! I said you do not listen to me. A word of complaint from me, and you say it is some misunderstanding on my part! That is what hurts me, so I have decided that you must choose between us."

Just at this moment, the music of the evening *pūja* arose. It was Sunity, who prayed for all, and the sound of her conch-shell, and the ringing of bells, told Uthanpad that his elder wife had finished her devotions and would soon be with them.

"Sunity will be here, in a moment," he began gently, but could say no more, as Suruchi pettishly interrupted, with, "So much the better. We can settle the question immediately."

After worshipping the god Vishnu, Sunity always came to do *pūja* to her husband and brought with her a *thalla* of flower-garlands, which she herself had made. She now entered, and, finding the room dark, smilingly asked Suruchi, "Dear Sister, the *arati* is over; why is there no light in this room?"

Suruchi answered, irritably: "I didn't want the light."

The elder Maharani allowed the impatience of her sister-wife to pass unnoticed. She was so used to Suruchi's sharp ways. Glancing at their husband with eyes of worshipping love, she placed the golden tray upon the floor and was about to kneel down at his feet, when the younger Maharani asked Uthanpad, disdainfully: "Why don't you tell her, now?"

The Maharajah did not answer.

"Will you, or will you not?" demanded Suruchi, her eyes flashing angrily.

Uthanpad remained silent, and Sunity looked from him to her co-wife, with her face full of wondering concern.

"Shall I speak, then?" asked Suruchi, and the impatience of her desire to do so was very evident in her voice.

Still the Maharajah was dumb, and Sunity, looking at his troubled face, turned to the younger wife and asked:

"Suruchi, what has happened? Is our lord ill? He looks unusually tired, this evening "

Suruchi tossed her head, scornfully, and replied

"There is nothing the matter with him. He is a weak man, that is all and is afraid to hurt your feelings "

"Hurt my feelings!" echoed Sunity, perplexed and alarmed, not for herself but for her husband, who was everything to her. "What is it, dear sister? Do not keep me in suspense any longer "

"I do not wish to keep the matter from you," answered the younger Queen. "The trouble is that there are two of us, and I have decided that, if you remain here, I shall go back to my parents, or else I shall be the Maharani and you may go back to your parents "

She had spoken rapidly, and now she paused for breath, and Sunity, who could not perceive the venom that lay under the spiteful words, came closer to her and said, in a peace-making voice

"If I have done anything to vex you, tell me what it is, and will you not forgive me? You are to me a younger sister and I am your *didī* "

"Forgive!" and the scorn of Suruchi's tone cut Sunity like a lash. "Am I in a position even to hear such words? You rule the State, you rule the palace, and everyone in it, and you ask me to forgive! What power have I?"

"Dear sister", entreated Sunity, "do tell me what has vexed you? Let me help you, if there is any misunderstanding "

"Oh, I am tired of that word!" exclaimed Suruchi, with an angry gesture, but her anger-lit eyes and flushed cheeks added to her beauty, while Sunity, in her distress, looked small and pale beside her. "It is always 'misunderstanding', I am determined to end it, and shall begin with that string of pearls round your neck. Why should you have everything? That necklace belonged to the State. Why should you always wear it?"

The elder Maharani looked towards their husband, as if she expected that he would answer his younger wife's question, and, had he spoken, this story would, perhaps, never have been, but he remained silent, merely glancing, in

a troubled way, from one queen to the other Sunity gathered from his silence, that he wished the gift of the necklace to remain secret between them. She loved those pearls. Since her wedding night they had always rested on her neck, and seemed to her a pledge of her husband's love and she had hoped never to part with them. But now she felt that her love for her lord demanded a sacrifice on her part, so, unclasping the necklace, she held it out to her *sapatni* and said

"Here it is. I was married first, and the State thought I should have these family pearls, but you and I are sister wives and what is mine is yours. Take them."

Suruchi snatched the pearls from Sunity's hand. Her face had been angry and scornful before, but now it blazed with passion, as, with trembling hands, she broke the necklace and flung the costly pearls from her.

"Dare you insult me? Dare you?" she panted. "Sunity, do you forget that I, too, am a *Rajmandini*?" (King's daughter). "Am I to beg presents from my *sapatni*? You know that you have insulted me, and I shall never, never forget it. You are the favourite wife, so stay here, and I shall go back to my father."

"Oh, Suruchi," pleaded Sunity, "do not let us quarrel. Why cannot we live together in our husband's house, like sisters? I really love you as my sister."

"No," declared Suruchi, "there is no State, no palace, in the wide world, large enough to hold us both. Our husband must make his choice. You stay here, or I, not both of us."

There was no doubting the determination in her voice. She had exposed her hand, and she felt that she could not now retract, nor did she wish to do so. She must win or lose. Both Queens waited for the Maharajah's decision, but he still maintained silence.

Suruchi spoke again, her voice harsh and decisive. "Well, my husband and King, as you will not speak, I take it for granted that I, being the younger, am to go," and she turned towards the door.

Her ruse succeeded. The Maharajah rose hastily from his seat and, striding to Suruchi, caught her hands, beseeching her, passionately: "Don't go! Don't leave me!"

In his haste, he stepped on the *thalla* of garlands that Sunity had so carefully prepared. She saw her pretty flowers crushed and scattered, and felt that it was her heart on which he trod. For an instant, the pain of his careless and unconscious act held her in silent anguish. Then she quickly decided the future and, kneeling at Uthanpad's feet, she clasped her hands, in worshipping adoration, and bade him farewell.

"My *devata* (god), my husband," she said, "if I have ever displeased you, pray forgive me. I am now deprived of my one happiness in life, and that is to worship your feet."

She bent her head, in homage, till her forehead touched the Maharajah's feet. Two great tears fell from her eyes and dropped on his bare instep and Uthanpad started, but Suruchi had his hands tightly clasped in hers, and her eyes held his. This was her hour of triumph, and she did not intend to lose it.

Sunity stood up, and addressed herself, quickly and affectionately, to the exulting young Maharani:

"Dear sister, take care of our husband. And if I have in any way offended you, please forgive me."

Silently, she dropped her tears in the dark room, and swiftly left it. To her, the world was blank, all joy and happiness left behind. When she reached her own apartments, Sunity yielded to her grief. Closing the doors, and extinguishing the wicks in the gold *pradip* (lamps), she threw herself face downwards on the floor, and sobbed as if her heart must break.

She cried out: "Why have I no son? I would never have been deserted by my husband, were there a child on my lap to-day. A woman who is childless has no lasting happiness in her life. A son is the best ornament she can have, and, because I am a childless woman, my husband has sent me away."

Then, with clasped hands, she prayed, whispering brokenly, "Vishnu, oh, God, give me strength to bear my burden, or I cannot live. In mercy, give

me light and show me my path. What wrong have I done, that I should be thus punished? Am I not worthy of my lord? Why should I lose the happiness of being near him? Ah, God, guide me, help me in this darkness, and forgive me, if I have done any wrong."

Her spirit grew stronger, as she prayed, and she said to herself, "My father's last wish, on my wedding-day, was that my love for my husband should be unselfish. Vishnu, give me grace, that my parents may never be disappointed in me. If my love for my husband is true, teach me to suffer silently."

After a time, she became calm. It seemed to her that God had heard her prayer. The darkness of her soul was not so intense and her mind felt clearer. She opened the door, noiselessly, and went out into the garden. The Palace was quiet. Returning to her room, she took off her jewels, leaving only the *mangal-sutra* round her neck and a pair of thin gold bangles on her wrists. Her *mangal-sutra* was her wedding-amulet, and was a string of black beads, with a gold ball in the centre. She changed her *sari* for one of the plain silk ones she wore when she did *puja*. Then, silently and secretly, she left the Palace, where she had spent so many happy years, left her husband's home, and no one saw her go.

It was a dark night, and Sunity hurried to the river. This was the only part of the town that she knew, for she had often bathed at the *ghat* and worshipped in the temple there. At first Sunity was frightened, for it was dark and quiet and she had never in her life been out alone, but she again prayed for strength and her brave spirit asserted itself. She walked on, and crossed the boundary of her husband's kingdom and found herself on the bank of a wide river, with a dense forest bordering it on each side. She continued along the bank, journeying on through the night, and towards daybreak she discerned some cottages.

Sunity bathed in the river, and said her morning prayers. Then, feeling refreshed and invigorated, she walked towards the cottages. What a peaceful sight met her eyes! Soothing was the morning air, and she was attracted by the calm and quietness of this *topoban*. The hermits were already up and

about, some gathering flowers for their *pūja*, others at worship, seated before *hom*, or sacred fire. Others sat on tiger or deer skins, in *yoga* (meditation) or chanting morning hymns. The whole atmosphere spoke of peace and holiness, and was balm to poor Sunity's sad heart. She seated herself on the steps of a cottage, and enjoyed the delightful scene. Birds fluttered everywhere. They knew that, in this retreat, none would hurt them and, warbling new songs of praise to their Maker, they flew from bough to bough or foraged in the verdant grass. The sun rose, in golden splendour, and smiled 'once again upon the earth.

Sunity felt that no sorrows or troubles could enter here, and her heart was lifted up towards heaven. As she sat there, an elderly lady came out of the cottage, clad in the *garooah* coloured *sari* of a hermit. Her face was benign and motherly, and, as Sunity rose and, with clasped hands, made her *dandabat*, (act of homage or salutation) the *moonpains* was struck with the refinement of the stranger's appearance, and asked kindly, "Who are you?"

Sunity said gently, "May I call you 'mother', and the *Moonibar*, 'father'?"

Her softly modulated voice, and delicate hands and feet, proclaimed to the hermit's wife that no ordinary person was addressing her, and she was considering her reply when her husband came to the cottage door. He was the *herd moon* of the *topoban*, and his venerable face bespoke a sympathetic heart. Sunity bent low and, touching his feet in salutation, asked "Revered Sir, may I call you 'father'?"

The hermit and his wife had no children of their own and Sunity's request appealed to the kindly old man. From that day, the saintly old pair looked upon the unknown stranger as their daughter. They built a little hut for her, close to their cottage, and there, unrecognized and lost to her world, lived Sunity, the tenderly cherished daughter of Dharmabrata Maharajah and the Queen of the great Maharajah Uthanpad.

No sooner had Sunity made her exit from her co-wife's room than Suruchi sprang to the door and closed and barred it. It seemed to her too much to believe that Sunity was really going away, but Suruchi determined that she

would aid her in her departure by leaving her undisturbed. Accordingly, she used every art to keep the Maharajah with her. More than once, he said that he must go to Sunity and ask her forgiveness, and that the three of them must try and live happily together. Each time, Suruchi succeeded in preventing him from carrying out his desire and, as he was really troubled, Suruchi danced and sang to him, with such delightful abandon, that at last he forgot the unpleasant happening and yielded to his younger wife's enchantment, comforting himself with the thought that Sunity would forgive and be as sweet as ever.

But, in spite of his infatuation for Suruchi, Uthanpad really loved his first wife, and early next morning he sent a message, asking her to come to him. The maid returned, looking alarmed, and said that the Maharani Sunity was not in her room, that her bed had not been slept on and that all her jewels lay upon it. The King listened with dismay and then, heaving a deep sigh, and without a word to Suruchi, left the *antapur*.

Not a trace of the missing Queen could he find, in palace or garden, so the Maharajah despatched messengers in search of her all over his capital and kingdom, and then to Dharmahrata Raj, but without any result.

Sunity's parents were overcome with grief. Their minds flew back to her early childhood and the sage's prophecy, "a great queen."

"What greatness is there?" they asked each other. "She has been turned out of her husband's home by a jealous *sapatni*. And Sunity, our little Sunity, our delicately-nurtured and dearly-loved child, is now adrift, God knows where, at the mercy of a pitiless world. Oh, the horror of it! Why did she not come to us?"

Then they learned, from Uthanpad's messengers, that when Maharani Suruchi had said, "One of us must return to her parents," the Maharani Sunity had replied, "Why should I go to my parents? They married me to my husband, and I shall live and die for him. A wife's love must be unselfish."

One after another, Uthanpad's messengers returned, after a hopeless search, and the conviction grew that the poor Maharani had drowned herself.

Word was brought to Suruchi that some boatmen had seen a figure on the bank of the river at midnight. The boatmen had not spoken to her, because they thought she was a *banadevi* (forest goddess). Suruchi did not trouble the Maharajah with this news. He preferred to remain away from her, so the Maharani Suruchi would leave him alone.

At first, Uthanprad felt miserable at the loss of Sunity. The memory of the happiness of his married life with her swept over his soul and filled his mind with regrets and remorse. He blamed himself bitterly, for his weakness with Suruchi. Had he been firm she would have overcome her jealousy, and the two queens would have lived together as happily as sisters—like so many other co-wives. Why, he wondered, did he not tell Suruchi that the pearl necklace was given by him to Sunity on their wedding night, and so settled that matter? Yes, it was all his fault. But he must now no longer indulge Suruchi. He must show her how displeased he was, so he kept away from the *antapur* and absorbed himself in State affairs. Furrows of sorrow appeared on his handsome face, and he forgot to smile. But, as the weeks lengthened into months, and no tidings came of Sunity, he, too, believed that she had killed herself. For a while, he sorrowed at her loss, but, as the edge of his grief wore off, he became resigned, and yielded to Suruchi's fascinations once again, and she, who had been patiently waiting to catch his heart again in its rebound, was very bright and sweet, so Sunity was forgotten, and Suruchi queened it, in Palace and State.

In the hermitage, Sunity was known as *moonipatni*, and was loved by all. Some addressed her by the sweet name of 'mother'. Others affectionately called her *didhi* (elder sister) and many, attracted by the gentle saintliness of her life, bestowed upon her the beautiful title of *devi* (goddess). None knew that she was a Maharani, or anything of her former life. She hid her sorrow in her own heart, and devoted herself to the lives around her.

Sunity had always been fond of flowers, and now they became dearer to her, for they seemed to speak to her of God's beauty, and their perfume revealed to her the sweetness of His mercy. She made a pretty little garden in front of her

hut and the blossoms there gladdened the hearts of all in the *topoban*. Creepers covered the humble dwelling, and birds nested there and made the place gay, with their songs. All the hermits declared that Sunity's tiny hut and garden were to the *topoban* like a flower ever in bloom and giving its sweetness to others.

Sheltered in this peaceful retreat, Sunity's soul shook off its sorrow, and expanded. Clearer to her mental vision came the reason of existence. Life is given to each to help and to uplift the world, so all should forget themselves and live for those around them. These reflections, and her practical application of them to her own life, gave to her beauty a higher quality, and, in her *garooah sari* of coarse cloth, Sunity, the unknown *moompatni*, was lovelier than Sunity, the Queen of Uthanpad.

About two years had passed away, when, one day, Maharajah Uthanpad arranged a great *shikar* (hunt). After saying goodbye to his handsome Suruchi, who always charmed him, with her bright, happy face Uthanpad mounted his fine hunter, and the cavalcade started. The shooting-party was a large one, and they anticipated good sport, but after a few days' hunting in the forest, it began to rain. The hunters stopped, hoping the weather would soon clear, but the sky grew blacker and a severe storm came on. The lightning and thunder were terrible. So the party dispersed, riding away as fast as they could to their homes.

Somehow, the Maharaja lost his attendants and his way. He galloped on, but the vivid flashes of lightning frightened his horse, and the darkness between the flashes, and the heavy jungle, hindered his progress. Ever and again, he could hear the terrified roar of some fierce animal, as the thunder crashed and the forest shook with the mighty gusts of wind.

Uthanpad's advance became slower and slower, and, finally, he dismounted and, leaving his horse to go wherever it pleased, he endeavoured to make his way on foot through the thick undergrowth. He had not gone far when a breathing behind him convinced him that he was being stalked by a tiger. He quickened his pace and, after a frantic struggle, through branches and creepers,

emerged into a clearing in the forest. A flash of lightning showed him the outline of a hut and he ran towards it, hurried up the steps of a tiny verandah, and knocked at the door. The rain was pouring in torrents and no one seemed to have heard him, so he knocked more loudly, and called out

"Oh, kind hearted ones! give me shelter. I am lost in the jungle. Whoever you are, be kind, and God will bless you."

The door was opened, but a gust of wind extinguished the rush-light that was burning within. Uthanpad stumbled into the hut, in the darkness, and he heard someone close the door. By the lightning's glare, he saw the figure of a woman.

"Revered lady," he said, "I know thou art *moonipaini*. I am most grateful to thee, for this shelter. I shall not give thee much trouble and shall depart immediately the storm is over."

"Sire," replied a gentle voice, and its trembling sweetness seemed familiar to the Maharajah, "make yourself quite comfortable. I shall go to my mother's cottage and sleep there. In these jungles, storms sometimes last for days."

"Oh, I am sure it will stop by morning", Uthanpad replied cheerfully though inwardly thrilled and puzzled by the sweet voice.

"Anyhow, Sire, will you stay here, and I shall go to my mother."

Again that haunting, familiar cadence! He must hear her speak once more, so he asked

"How can you go anywhere, in this pouring rain? And there are tigers prowling about."

"Tigers do not come inside this *topoban*," she answered, "and my father's prayers are so powerful that should any fierce animals enter, they become as mild and gentle as deer. Only peace and love reign here."

The Maharajah wondered if his senses were leaving him. This was the voice of Sunity! Who could this *moonipaini* be? Sunity relit her *pradip* (oil lamp) and, as the wick caught the flame, Uthanpad noticed her beautiful, shapely hands and recognized them. But, to make quite sure that it was she, he asked

"Moompalm, why art thou alone here? Where is thy husband?"

Sunity trembled, hesitated and stammered "He—my husband—is—
not—"

But the Maharajah did not wait for the end of her sentence. Those trembling hands, that quivering figure, the hesitating speech all told him that it was really Sunity. He stepped up to her, pulled off the head dress that had covered and hidden her face, and said, in a glad voice

"Is it you, my wife, my precious long lost Sunity?"

Sunity fell at his feet, crying "Yes, my lord, I am your poor, forsaken wife."

He lifted her up in his arms, and held her closely to his heart, calling her by every endearing name he had fondly given her in the long ago happy days. He kissed her face, her lips, her hair. It seemed as if he could never satisfy his hungry heart, and she clung to him and sobbed out her grief and joy. Then he broke into passionate self reproaches, and asked her

"Why did you shelter me? Why did you not let me die in the storm? I deserved it, or to be killed by a tiger. Sunity, my beloved wife, I deserted you. You wandered out, alone, and I never tried to stop you. I should have protected you from all trouble, but I did not. And now, to night, you forget all my neglect and my weakness and, like the angel that you are take me into shelter and save me. Oh, Sunity, Sunity, there has never been love like yours. It is a pure and unselfish love, for you expected nothing in return. I am in no way worthy of it, and I feel it more to night than I ever did before."

Sunity answered all his self upbraidings with these simple words

"My husband and King, you are my all in all, now and for ever."

The next morning, Sunity told her adopted parents of her visitor and who he and she were. Uthirpad remained in the *topoban*, and lived there happily for some months.

In the meantime, the scattered hunting party had returned, and told the Maharani Suruchi of the storm, and how they had become separated from their royal master. The Queen sent out search parties, and one of them found the

King's horse wandering, riderless, and another returned with the Maharajah's sword and told of tiger-tracks following the foot-prints of their master. So, everyone concluded that Uthanpad had been killed by a tiger, or had walked into the river in the forest. Suruchi administered the State and wept for her husband. But one day, to her great joy, he returned

The people were exceedingly glad to see their Maharajah among them once more, and looking so wonderfully happy. But, in answer to her anxious questions, Uthanpad told Suruchi so many different stories that she became suspicious. Again and again, she returned to the subject, and one day received a confused account of how he had been followed by a tiger and had climbed a tree.

"Yes, but what did you do, when morning came?" asked Suruchi. "Why were you so long in finding your way home?"

"My dear wife," he replied loftily, but looking decidedly uncomfortable, "you have no idea how dense the jungle is, and how anyone lost there can wander for days."

"Yes, for days," answered Suruchi, "but not for months! Was there no *topoban* near? How did you live, all that time?"

This question hit the mark so closely that Uthanpad's face coloured, and he looked guilty. The remembrance of those happy, peaceful days with Sunity held him in a dream, and he did not answer. But Suruchi was now sure that he was endeavouring to conceal something from her, and she asked sharply

"Why are you silent, my lord?"

The imperious voice recalled him, but he was confused and answered absently: "Sunity—I mean, Suruchi, what is it you wanted to know?"

"Nothing," said Suruchi, rising and quitting the room, in offended indignation. All her old jealousies returned to her. "How could he possibly mistake me for Sunity?" she asked herself, "and what made him do so, after all this time? Where had he been?" She began to think that perhaps, after all, her *sapatni* was not dead, and that the Maharajah knew where Sunity was.

In the *topoban*, Sunity had been very happy, all the time Uthanpad had

been with her. It had been like the early days of her married life, having him all to herself, only sweeter because of their separation and his remorseful love, which could never atone to her for what he had made her suffer. He promised that she should come back to him and vowed he would send an escort, to bring her back as his Maharani. When he left, she lived on the memory of those blissful days, and in fond expectation of the suite to take her home, but Uthanpad had not the courage to fulfil his promise, and Sunity went on wondering and hoping, till the birth of her child.

When the exiled Maharani first saw her babe, tears rolled down her cheeks, tears, not of sorrow, but of joy and happiness. She took the loved mite in her arms, and said :

"My son, my treasure, star of my soul, you are my own, my very own. There is no one to share your love with me. There will be no parting with you, my sweet son. Vishnu has heard all my prayers, and you are heaven's gift to me, in my loneliness. God has given you to me, my son, and you shall be my star, my happiness."

After the birth of her child, Sunity never again felt sad or lonely. Her heart was full of gratitude, and, when she looked at the beautiful world around her, she felt that God was all love, and thanked him for all his mercy to her.

The venerable *Moombur*, whom she addressed as 'father', named the baby *Dhruba*, and he grew to boyhood in the *topoban*. As he passed from infancy, and his mind began to develop, Sunity felt that he, the heir of Uthanpad, was not in his rightful place, and sometimes at night, when he slept, on his bed of dry grass, she wept that he was unknown. But, ere morning came, she always put aside her sorrow and had a bright face for *Dhruba*, who would have cried to see his mother sad.

Often she wished that the boy were more like his father, but his face was the image of hers and, as he grew, the likeness increased. In India, it is considered lucky for a boy to be like his mother, and a girl like her father.

As *Dhruba* became older, he began to ask questions about his absent parent. Sunity always answered : "He is handsome, kind and rich."

"When shall I see him, mother?"

"When you are a big boy, my son "

One day, the *moonibalaks* (sons of *moonis*) asked Dhruba where his father was, and he answered "Mother says he is rich and handsome and clever and when I am a big boy I shall see him " Another day, the *moonibalaks* said "Dhruba, you are getting a big boy, now, and we feel shy, playing with you, because you have no clothes on "

Dhruba ran back to his mother and kissed her sweetly, and told her what the *moonibalaks* said Sunity kissed his little face There was a great pain in her heart, to think that Maharajah Uthanpad's heir had no clothes to put on, and that the *moonibalaks* should talk about it She hid her feelings, and tore a piece off her *sari* and clad him in it, saying, "My little Dhruba you are all right, now You have the same garment as your mother "

Dhruba was five years old, when, one day, some of the boys in the hermitage asked him to accompany them to a *darbar* Dhruba assented eagerly, for he had never been out of the *topoban* in his life The boys started off gaily and, after walking briskly, entered a large city Dhruba looked at everything with great interest—the paved streets, the massive buildings and the palace

No one attempted to stop the boys, when they entered the *darbar*, for their saffron coloured garments showed that they were *moonis*' sons, and were their passports The soldiers on guard, the important looking officials and the resplendent throne awed the other boys but Dhruba accepted all around him as if born to it, and calmly proceeded to the throne

The courtiers were struck with his appearance He was tall for his age, and very graceful, with a certain high bred manner and dignity, gained from continued companionship with his mother His black curls covered his well shaped head and long, silken lashes heightened the beauty of his expressive, black eyes, while the soft, velvety skin, and scarlet lips, gave to his bright little face the final touch of perfection

His companions, standing near the entrance, wondered at his temerity, and every eye in the *darbar* was riveted on him, as he reached the foot of the throne

But he was unconscious of what was going on around him, for his eyes, opened wide and full of interest and enquiry, were gazing at Maharajah Uthanpad, who was enthroned there

The King with a strange quickening of the heart, noticed the little boy. His face became flushed, and his breathing agitated, as he whispered within himself, "This child is the image of Sunity. Can he be her son?"

He bade the lad come to him. Dhruba responded eagerly and, walking up the steps of the throne, stood beside the Maharajah, who, stirred by some impulse, lifted him on to his knee, fondled him and asked, "Who is your father?"

Nobles and courtiers had noticed the child's wonderful resemblance to the Maharani Sunity, and awaited his answer in breathless curiosity. Dhruba's clear, treble accents rang through the silent assembly. "I have not seen him, yet. My mother says that when I am a big boy I shall see him, and that he is the best of fathers." His little head was proudly held, and he spoke with earnest conviction of his father's worth.

"From where do you come?" asked the King.

"From the *topoban*," Dhruba replied, looking, with his great eyes, straight into those of Uthanpad, who knew, then, that this lad was indeed Sunity's son. So engrossed were the Maharajah and the boy with each other, that for them the world had ceased to be, and they did not hear the rustling of silk behind the curtain at the back of the throne.

"Who is your mother?" enquired the Maharajah, and the eagerness of his tone convinced the listening one that the answer was freighted with interest for the King.

"My mother!"—and Dhruba's silvery voice became enthusiastic, "you will love her, when you see her——"

But his loyal eulogy was checked, for Suruchi appeared from behind the throne, a regal figure of fierce jealousy, gleaming in cloth of gold and sparkling with jewels, with her son beside her. She lifted Dhruba off the Maharajah's knee and, setting him roughly upon the floor, said angrily.

"Who are you, little boy? How dare you come and sit on the Maharajah's knee? You are a heggar's child. Go away. Your mother should have known better than to allow you to come here. This throne is not for a heggar's son, but for a Maharajah's son. See, this is the boy for this seat of honour," and she placed her own son on the Maharajah's knee.

Dhruba had never heard such a harsh voice, in his life. The Queen's angry grasp had hurt his tender arm, and her speech frightened him. He trembled with fear, and great tears rolled down his cheeks. His bright face was now clouded, and his eager little heart beat fast. What had he done? he wondered, but none ventured to enlighten or pity him. The Queen stood, watchful and jealous, beside the King, who, with bent head and lowered eyes, held her son upon his knee.

Dhruba, his little head drooping, saw and heard nothing around him, as he walked to the door, a disconsolate little figure, his bearing so different from the proud fearlessness with which he had entered the *darbar*. The *moon* boys felt sorry for their friend and, when he gained the entrance where they stood, they grouped themselves protectingly around him, the two nearest holding his hands in an elder brotherly fashion, and all left the *darbar*.

As they walked quickly to the *topoban*, for they were fearful of pursuit, they wondered aloud, in what way Dhruba had given offence, and expressed their opinions and advice very freely. "How cruel the Maharani was— The Maharajah should have reproved her— If being a Maharajah's son means having a proud, cruel mother like her, we are glad we are not princes," and so on.

Dhruba listened to his friends, but made no reply, for his heart was too sore and too full for words. When they reached the *topoban*, the elder boys suggested that they should play some games, and said to Dhruba:

"Come with us, and forget all about the haughty queen."

"Brother, forgive me," answered Dhruba, "I do not feel inclined to play, I am going to my mother."

He turned away from them, and ran swiftly to the hut. Sunity was

watching for him, for it was late, and his evening meal had long been ready. He threw himself into her arms, and hurst into tears. This was so unusual that Sunity wondered what could have happened, and kissed him, again and again. He lay sobbing in her arms and, thinking he was over-fatigued, she carried him into the hut and said :

"You are tired, my son. Have your supper, and go to sleep."

Dhruha answered, with a fresh hurst of grief. "No, mother, I am not tired. I want my father! I want my father!"

In keen distress, Sunity pressed him to her heart. Oh, the hidden pang of that moment! Anguish choked her, for a few tense seconds, and when she spoke, her voice held chords of sorrow and dread that were new to Dhruha.

"My child, my child, my precious son! You will see him, you will, when you are bigger. Have I not often told you so?"

"Yes, mother, but I want him to-night. Where is he? I must go to him, for the *moon*-boys urge to tell it all to my father."

"What has happened to you to-day, Dhruha? Tell me, my son, tell me," begged Sunity, once more throwing her arms round her child, and kissing him fervently.

And Dhruha, with his head pillowed on her gentle breast, told her all concluding with : "I am sure if my father knew, he would be very sorry, and would tell the Maharani that I am not a beggar's son."

Poor Sunity! how the boy's artless words cut her soul. What an inextricable position it was! She, living hidden and unknown! Her son, the heir to Uthanpad's throne, unacknowledged and now spurned! And Suruchi with a son, and scheming for his succession. Oh, it was a terrible tangle, and Sunity lived over all her suffering again and suffered afresh, but now her anguish was keener and more crushing, for she suffered for and with her child. She felt Suruchi's harsh touch, she heard her cruel words, and she felt as if her own bleeding heart could hear no more, and that death would be more welcome than life. But her love for her child gave her new strength and she controlled herself and said to him, soothingly :

did not perceive that her words had made a deeper impression than usual, for she had often talked to Dhruba of the gracious personality of God, and the child had always listened eagerly for he was extraordinarily intelligent and receptive. But to-night, she struck a deeper note on his pure, young heart, and his spirit bounded forward, in advance of hers, and he determined to meet and know his God.

After their supper, mother and child sought their humble bed of dried grass, and Sunity slept, but Dhruba lay awake beside her. His mind, excited by the day's unusual happening, his grief and his desire to see *Hari* would not let him sleep. At last, the eager longing made him rise. He sat up quietly, and looked at his mother. She was in a deep sleep but her troubled mind had caused her to dream, and to weep in her dream and Dhruba saw great tears roll down her cheeks. The boy wondered, 'Is there any sorrow in her life? Or does she know I am going to leave her and go to the jungle, to find God?'

He watched her for a while. Then, clasping his hands, he prayed, in a whisper

"*Hari*, great God, I am leaving my mother, to night to find you. But she is all I have, in this world, and I am all she has. Kind *Hari*, when she wakes and calls me, will you be Dhruba and answer her, and call her *ma*, (mother)? Do, dear God, comfort her, and take care of her, for me.

He got up noiselessly to his feet and walked gravely five times round his sleeping mother, praying all the time to God to watch over her, in his absence. Then he knelt at her feet, clasping his hands and touching the ground with his forehead in filial homage, afraid to wake her if he touched her feet, and whispered, "Mother, this is my farewell. If I find *Hari* I shall return to you, but if I do not find Him, I shall never come back. When you wake, you will find the hut empty, with no Dhruba here, and, when you call me, the echo will mock you, but mother, pray that I may find God. Then I shall come back, and you will see your Dhruba again. Goodbye, poor mother, dear mother."

Dhruba stood up, and looked at his mother's beautiful, still face, and the

"Dhruba, my precious one, now forget all, and come and have supper."

The boy did not notice her request. Instead, he asked :

"My mother, tell me, who can make me happy, and dry my tears, if I cannot go to my father? Dear mother," and he put his little arms around her neck and looked most winningly into her face, "my heart is sad, and I want to be happy."

Sunity's soul was pierced through and through. She crushed the boy to her heart, and he wondered at the vehemence of her embrace. Bitter thoughts chased one another through her gentle mind, "Could not Suruchi have spared my child, my innocent little Dhruba? She is a mother, herself, and yet she hurts him, to hurt me!"

Yet again, she overcame herself and strove to comfort Dhruba

"My good little son, have patience! You will see your father one day."

"But, is there no one else who can help me, mother?"

"Yes, Dhruba, there is one who can dry all tears and comfort every heart."

"Who is he, mother?"

"He is *Hari*, (God) my Dhruba."

"Where does He live, mother? Where does He live?"

Sunity said, lightly: "In the thick, very thick jungle, where no one can go"

"You are quite sure, dear mother, that *Hari* can make any one happy, who goes to Him?"

"Yes, my son, perfectly happy."

"Can He make me happy, too, mother?"

"Yes," said Sunity, kissing him.

Dhruba smiled, radiantly, and, kissing his mother, said: "Oh, I am glad He can. Now, I shall have supper."

Sunity was pleased that her simple words had comforted him. He was to her, still, her baby, and no thought entered her mind of his wandering forth into the forest, to find this wonderful *Hari*, who held happiness in his hands. She had frequently told him that no mortals had ever penetrated there. She

did not perceive that her words had made a deeper impression than usual, for she had often talked to Dhruba of the gracious personality of God, and the child had always listened eagerly for he was extraordinarily intelligent and receptive. But to-night, she struck a deeper note on his pure, young heart, and his spirit bounded forward, in advance of hers, and he determined to meet and know his God.

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Dhruba stood up, and looked at his mother's beautiful, still face, and the

seriousness of his expression seemed far beyond his tender years, as he pressed his hands closely together, and said, in an intensity of supplication "God, merciful God, take care of mother I go to find you "

Then he unlatched the door and stepped out on the little verandah. There was a strong breeze, which blew out the *pradip* in the hut, when he opened the door. Dhruba feared that, if he went in, to relight it, he might waken his mother, so he gently fastened the door, and left the hut.

To the guardian spirit of the night, the darkness in the hut after Dhruba had left it, seemed symbolical of the darkness which would engulf the poor, exiled queen without her son. He was the light of her life.

It was a dark night and, anon, the roar of a tiger reverberated through the forest. But Dhruba's fearless spirit did not quail. His mind was set on finding God, and he paid little attention to what surrounded him. He spent the whole night wandering about in the forest, praying to *Hari* and begging Him to reveal Himself. Dawn found the boy far away from the *topoban*. Plunging into a forest stream, he refreshed his body, said his usual morning prayers and resumed his quest.

Thus, this artless child spent six months wandering in the virgin forest, calling, ever calling, upon God to show Himself. At times, kneeling upon a rock, he ravished Heaven with his pleading. Then, prostrate on the grass or hard earth, he wrung the angels' hearts with his tears and cries. With all the strength of his being, he hungered and thirsted for God, and he called upon all nature to assist him in his search.

To the birds, he cried "Oh winged ones, are you flying through the sky to *Hari*? Tell Him Dhruba wants Him on earth "

To the fruit "Are you hanging here and ripening because *Hari* told you to? Tell Him I want to see Him "

To the lotus "Are you so beautiful because you do *puja* (worship) to *Hari's* feet? Tell Him that Dhruba's heart wants to be like you and worship Him "

To the winds, he cried "O Winds of Heaven, carry my prayer to *Hari*

I want Him to come here to me."

He was standing by a river, praying, when he saw a peacock, and he addressed the beautiful bird and said: "No, surely, I have seen God, for mother told me He is beautiful."

The King of Birds spread out his beautiful tail, and danced before the boy. Dhruva wandered on, and in the evening stillness met a deer. Approaching it, with welcoming hands, he said: "Ah, you must be God! Mother told me He had loving, tender eyes."

The gentle deer knelt beside him, and he stroked and caressed it. In the brightness of the moon, at midnight, a tiger came close to the little boy, who exclaimed, joyfully: "I have found God, at last. Mother always said He is grand. You must be God."

The tiger looked at the child, then came closer and knelt in homage and placed his head on Dhruva's feet. Dhruva smiled a tender smile, and knew that he had again mistaken a beautiful creature for the All-Beautiful Creator. And now, the boy felt his heart break with desire, and he called aloud, in tones of piercing supplication:

"O Hari, Padma-Palash Lochan Hari!" (lotus-petal-eyed) "do not my prayers touch your feet? Do you not know that Dhruva wants you? I cannot, I will not, leave the jungle, until I see and know my God. Come, O Hari, Hari, Hari, come to me."

Looking up, Dhruva saw, standing in front of him, a *jogi*, in hermit's attire, with a musical instrument in his hand. Dhruva fell at his feet, crying:

"You are my God! You are Hari!"

Lifting him in his arms, the hermit said:

"No, little Dhruva, my child, I am only devoted to Hari. My name is Narad."

"Shall I not see God, then, oh, Narad *moonni*?"

"Yes, my child, you will see Him, but, Dhruva, you have not been initiated, so your mind and body have yet to be purified."

Dhruva anxiously said:

"Revered Sir, be kind Lose no time in initiating me "

Narad bathed the child in the river Jumna and initiated him, and then said

"Dhruba, go to Madhu Ban There you will pray to *Harī*, and He will come to you "

Dhruba thanked him, and touched his feet Narad blessed him, saying

"God, the great God, for whom I wander from world to world, is pleased with you, Dhruba You will find Him in Madhu Ban, because He loves *bhakta* ' (devoted)

Dhruba travelled on to Madhu Ban, and there he prayed to *Harī*, day and night, for several days

It was the hour of dawn, the hour of greatest peace, the hour when pulsing life receives a thrill, a renewal of the greater life, which beats beyond this earth Heaven was pierced with his ardent cry The *devas* (gods) left their thrones and, hovering above the pure hearted boy, cast a wondrous radiance round him The angels left Heaven and, hiding themselves behind the clouds and stars, waited to watch the meeting of God and Dhruba

And, as they waited, they filled the forest and sky with strains of sweetest song Now, the heart of Heaven opened, and the mystery of God descended to Earth! *Devas* and angels clasped their hands to *Para-Brahma*, (the Supreme Spirit) as His glory passed them, and the forest lay entranced and luminous, in the effulgence of God *Harī* had come! The Hands of God blessed the simple faith of Sunity's son The Heart of God enveloped him, in divine love The Arms of God held him, in ineffable joy

Devas and angels showered heavenly flowers on Dhruba, who rested there in supreme content, listening to the voice which came to his ears

"Dhruba, your faith has conquered I am yours, and shall be ever with you, wherever you go, and your name shall live on earth while time shall last You shall ever be remembered, in the world, by my love For I am going to make a new heaven for you, and it will shine and guide people in this world, that they may never go astray "

Bathed in the radiance and love of God, Dhruba did not forget his mother,

and he prayed for her, asking :

"Dear God, come with me to my mother, and make her happy." And Hari left him, with the beautiful promise :

"My son, I shall be with you always, wherever you go "

Alone in the hut, Sunity awoke in the darkness, and found that Dhruba was not beside her. She lit the *pradip*, and discovered that he was not in the hut. Then a terrible fear came upon her, and she ran from the cottage, calling, "Dhruba, Dhruba !"

Topoban, forest and sky echoed "Dhruba ! Dhruba ! Dhruba !" but no answer came. Ever and again, the echo gave back her heart-rending cry, "Dhruba ! Dhruba ! Dhruba !" Then Sunity cast herself on the earth and wailed :

"Oh, Suruchi, what have I done ? Why do you thus persecute and punish me ? You robbed me of my husband. I forgave you because he loved you, and I gave you my place, my jewels, my all. Could you not spare my Dhruba ? First you hurt my boy's heart, and you have had him taken away from me !"

In the anguish of her grief, she rushed now here, now there, searching, calling, weeping, praying. "Oh, stars," she cried, "take care of my treasure ! Shine brightly on him, wherever he is Oh, Wind, be kind to my boy ! Fan him, cool him and refresh him !—Trees, shade my son !—Soft grass, spread yourself under his feet, and let not Earth or stones hurt him.—Fruit, ripen for him, if he hungers !—Rivers, quench his thirst, lave his body !" And she prayed :

"O Hari, Vishnu, most merciful God, watch over my precious son, the star of my clouded life."

The *topoban* was awakened by her cries of sorrow, and when the moon's found her in the forest, she did not know them. All their search for Dhruba was in vain, and poor Sunity's life was darkened and hopeless.

Spring-time returned, and all the earth seemed joyous and full of hope and gladness. In the *topoban*, the birds flew gaily from branch to branch, and

by his side, but her former brightness and self confidence were gone, and she looked nervous and ill at ease. In her secret soul she dreaded that the King might one day order her banishment from the State, and she loved him and her child.

The garoah clad Maharam and her son walked humbly to the throne. Every eye in that vast assemblage recognized them, and every heart thrilled at the saintly bearing of the long exiled Queen and the radiant beauty of the boy who stepped beside her.

But Sunity trembled with fear, as she entered the *darbar*. She dreaded Suruchi and her one thought was that Dhruba would again meet with scorn and repulsion and again hide himself in the forest. So she held his hand tightly in both of hers, and came only because she dared not lose sight of her boy.

The Maharajah's heart bounded with joy, when he saw Sunity approaching the dais. He left his throne and, descending the steps, came forward to meet his first wife and elder son, and Suruchi followed, accompanied by her little son. Fear and shame struggled for mastery, in the younger Maharani's face. When Dhruba saw her coming, with his father, a great gladness came into his eyes, and he fell at her feet, saluting her with gratitude and humility and saying:

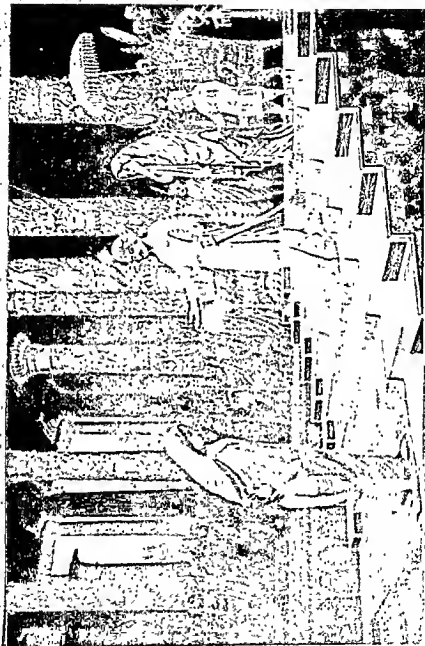
"Suruchi ma, bless me. May I never forget the gift you gave me, the gift of knowing God."

Suruchi looked ashamed and frightened at first, but, as Dhruba's words sounded in her ears, wonder, surprise and contrition chased one another across her handsome, and now care worn, face. She lifted Dhruba to his feet, and, with tears of sorrow pouring down her cheeks, implored him to forgive her.

The saintly boy put his arms round her, and said:

'Don't cry! don't cry! I love you. You have been a true mother to me, for, through you, I hold Hari in my heart.'

Then he released himself from her caresses and, kneeling before Uthanpad, touched his feet and craved a father's blessing. Suruchi turned from Dhruba



to throw herself on her knees before Sunity

"*Didi, didi,*" she cried, "I am glad you have come. Take your seat on the throne, beside our husband, and forgive me for all my jealousy and cruelty. I shall go away, for you are an angel, and I am not fit to be near you, but let me take your forgiveness with me. Once you called me 'sister' and asked me to love you. Oh, call me by that endearing name again, and let me love you!"

Sunity begged her to rise, and then standing beside her, said, affectionately

"I always thought of you with love, and you are still my younger sister. Do not talk of going away, for I have not come to live here. This Palace life would not suit me, now. Stay, dear Suruchi, and make our husband happy."

But at these words, Uthanpad came between the Queens and, looking at Sunity, said, in a loud, angry voice

"Make me happy! I do not wish to see Suruchi again."

The harshness of his tone thrilled the court. Sunity had never heard him speak in anger, and his wrath made her tremble, while Suruchi sank on her knees before him, in awful fear and speechless with grief. Suruchi's son clung to his mother, sharing, though not understanding, her trouble.

But now Dhruba knelt down and said, gently

"Maharaj, kind father, do not be vexed. Suruchi *ma* is my best friend. And she proved to you the unselfishness of my mother's love. We can all live happily, now."

The earnest request, the reverence of his manner and the silvery music of his voice calmed the angry King. He drew the boy nearer to him, and listened quietly, while Sunity spoke

"My lord," she began, "I came here for Dhruba's sake," and she related the story of his seeking and finding *Hari*, and why he came to see Maharani Suruchi, concluding with, "Now, my lord and husband, give me leave to return to the *topoban*."

"Never! never shall I let you go again!" said Uthanpad, holding her tightly by her arm, as if he feared she would run away.

"Oh, my lord," she pleaded, "I could not, now, be happy in a court. Let me return to the peaceful hermitage."

"If you go, I shall go with you," said Uthanpad. "There shall be no more cruel separations for you and me."

"Oh, father," cried Dhruba, his joyful eyes still more full of happiness, "how delightful it will be, to have you in the *topoban*, with mother and me."

The King startled. Remembrance of his kingly duty came back to him.

"No, no, my son," he said, "you cannot return to the forest. The throne is yours. I must place you upon it, before I go."

"Father, Maharaj, answered Dhruba, "pray, crown my little brother, Uthanpad. I love the hermit life. My happiest home is in my mother's lap," and his face paled at the thought of kingship and its responsibilities.

But, when the younger prince heard his brother's words, he left his weeping mother's side and, running to Dhruba, flung his arms around him, crying

"Dada, I do not want to be Maharajah while you are here, but I shall serve you as a servant. Do not listen to him, my King father, crown him."

Cries of admiration filled the *durbar*. Were ever princes like these! The Maharajah waited till the hurst of rapture was ended. Then he took his elder son's hand, and said

"Dhruba, you are my first born and heir. We know each other as father and son, to day, and the first and last request I make is for you to rule the kingdom, and leave me free to retire to the hermitage with your mother, and spend the evening of my life in penance and prayer."

Dhruba's eyes filled with tears, but he answered, "A son's duty is to obey."

In the few weeks they spent together, during the preparations for Dhruba's coronation, Suruchi could not do enough to show her deep repentance. Uthanpad forgave her, but she saw that she had ceased to hold any part in his life. When the royal pair were departing for the *topoban*, Sunity begged Suruchi to be a mother to her precious Dhruba, and Suruchi humbly promised

All her pride had fallen from her, and, though Dhruba had proclaimed that she was to remain in the Palace as Queen Mother, her humility and dejection were profound

When the moment of farewell came, Sunty took Dhruba in her arms, and strained him again and again to her heart, and Dhruba hid his face in her neck, and whispered

"Mother, best of mothers, I am so happy I have found God and known my father, and it is all because of you and your prayers Bless me, mother, that I may be a good man, and do my duty in the world I shall ever be known as 'Sunity nandan', (Sunity's son) God is with you, my sweet little mother He will care for you You have suffered much, but will be happy, now "

Great tears rolled down his cheeks Sunty kissed his loved face

"My precious son," she said, and her voice was tender and loving, and comforted Dhruba, in this pain of parting, "God is sending you to do His work on the throne of Uthanpad He will guide and keep you "

Then Sunty turned away, and went with Uthanpad to the *topoban* He had given up throne and State, and now separated himself from the world, to spend his last days in prayer and preparation for the next life He carried only one treasure with him to the hermitage, the priceless pearl necklace Claspng it round Sunty's neck, when they reached the hut, he said to her

"Dear wife, only a saint can wear these pearls I gathered them up, when Suruchi broke the string, and had them re strung and kept them for you, in the hope of finding you some day, and now they are yours again, for you are not only a saint yourself, but the mother of a saintly son You are my heavenly guide, my angel, my life's star "

Together, Uthanpad and Sunty lived happy lives, in the hermitage, for many years

Dhruba reigned on earth for a long time, and, when his term of mortal life was ended, God created a new heaven and enthroned him there, saying

"Thus Heaven shall shine for ever, and who seeks the true path, and looks at this star, shall be guided by its shining "

And this new Heaven is called, by Hindus, *Dhruba loka* or *Dhruba tara*
and the Western world knows it as the Pole Star, and it will keep shining till
Time is no more



SAKUNTALA

In the days of the remote past, when the Kings of Chandra-Vansa (Lunar Race) reigned at Prayag (modern Allahabad), a sage, named Bishwamitra, lived the life of a hermit in the forest of the district now known as Bijnor, in the United Provinces

So great were his austerities, that all men feared him and even the *devas* became alarmed lest, by his fasts and vigils, he should wrest a favour from Heaven, become a god and, by the power of his sanctity, destroy the beautiful earth. From their thrones of bliss, they often observed him at his devotions. Frequently, for days together, no food or water passed his lips and, whatever the season or weather, he sat in the open air, on a rock, and prayed, and prayed and prayed.

"We must do something," said the *devas*, "or this *moon* will obtain power to destroy the creation. Somehow or other, his *tapa* (prayers) must be stopped, and he must be made to see life with more human eyes."

They decided to go to Menaka, the most beautiful of all the celestial fairies, and, when they met her, they implored her to grant their wish and descend to the earth and tempt Bishwamitra. Poor Menaka shrank from the task, but the *devas* assured her that no harm would befall her, and said :

"All we want you to do is to show Bishwamitra the beauty of mortal love. It is the real link between man and God, and no human life is perfect without the knowledge that comes from love and suffering for the loved ones. Go, Menaka, and you shall be blessed as no fairy has ever before been, and your child shall give to the world a son of the royal race of the Moon, whose name shall never cease."

Menaka sorrowfully descended to the earth, and found Bishwamitra upon his prayer-worn rock, and she waited quietly for him, beside the river. For

hours, the *moon*'s eyes remained closed and his limbs and body motionless, as he meditated on God and strove to see the Beatific Vision. But, ever and again, his soul was beaten back to earth, till it seemed to him that something was wanting to his experience, to make him one with the Supreme Intelligence.

"When heaven fails, earth helps," he said to himself and opened his eyes, to gather fresh inspiration from the moonlit world, and he saw a beauteous vision resting on the grass, by the river.

"Has the river-goddess come out to enjoy the spell of night?" he asked himself. But something ethereal enveloped the recumbent form and drew his eyes to it once again, and he wondered, "Who can it be, so beautiful, so spiritual?" Then, curiosity laid her wand upon him and he rose from his prayer-rock, stole to the river, and stood and watched the fairy-maiden.

Menaka's quivering eyelids told the *moon* that she was not a vision, but a living soul. The wind stirred her gossamer draperies, revealing the fairness of her limbs and all her witching grace. Her soul fainted within her, and she dared not open her eyes. Would he annihilate her with the gleam of his joy-sealed eyes? As these thoughts flitted through her mind, she trembled and her bosom heaved. Something throbbed within the *moon*'s heart and made him wish to see her eyes. He drew a step nearer, and asked: "Who are you?"

Menaka did not know how to answer, and kept her eyes veiled and gazed upon the further bank. "Who are you?" again asked Biswamitra, and the cadence of his voice attracted her attention. It held an emptiness a harshness, born of the narrow judgments of his life. Rising, she fluttered to his side, and said alluringly, "Oh, *Moonbar*, Reverend Sir, I am alone," and cast herself, in breathless, palpitating homage, at his feet.

The music of her voice struck deep on Biswamitra's arid heart. It seemed in keeping with the radiant form, the wondrous grace, that knelt before him, on the velvet grass. "Alone!"—the pathos of that cry awakened his earthly soul. A newer view of life was in his ken.

He bent to her and whispered, soft and low: "Fair one, you must not be alone. Pray, come with me. My humble cot shall shelter you."

Menaka said: "I thank you, Revered Sir. I am grateful for your kind offer, for in this forest I have no shelter, and I accept your hospitality." She rose and followed him along the river bank, over the wind-swept grass, and through a forest glade and, as they went, fierce tigers met them on the way. But Bishwamitra spoke to them, and the lords of the primitive jungles bowed their heads in homage and slunk away. Then Menaka knew that the sage had wonderful power, by which even the wild beasts became harmless, and she trembled once again. When they reached the hut and Bishwamitra signed to her to go in, she hastily obeyed, and shut the door. And Bishwamitra spent the night without, but his soul was ravished and he did not sleep at all.

When the morning came, he called to her to come and break her fast. Then Menaka opened the door, and stepped into the sunlight, and he saw her wondrous eyes, and longed to be the sun, to kiss her cheeks and play among the raven masses of her hair.

"Fair maid," he said, and the new depth and timbre of his voice arrested her, and she turned to him and listened attentively. "You said you are alone. Stay here, and be my own. I love you."

They spent a happy time together, and then, one morning, as Bishwamitra strolled along the river bank, Menaka came to him, with a new-born babe within her arms, and, uncovering the lovely, tiny face, she said:

"Revered Sir, this is your child. What shall I do with her?"

Then Bishwamitra hid his eyes, and cried in horror:

"What have I done? Am I a father? Where are my vows of life-long celibacy? My *tapa*, of long years, all are ruined, and I, who tried to get a higher seat than all the *devas*, stand here an ordinary human being, the height of my pride all gone.—Away! away! do as thou wilt, with the child and thyself. I shall bury myself in the thick forest, where none can find me, and cleanse my soul by penance and prayer," and he left her.

Menaka wandered in the jungle, with the child, and moaned: "What shall I do with this poor babe? I cannot take her back to Heaven with me. I must leave her, here——. If she is saved, and grows to womanhood, we yet

may meet again." Then, tenderly kissing the child, she placed her under a tree, saying in farewell: "My love will protect you, my babe." And, springing upwards, she floated through the air and returned to Heaven.

The babe lay at the foot of the tree, and her piteous crying touched the hearts of a pair of *sakuntas*. The *sakunta* was a great bird that existed in those long-ago ages. When these birds saw the deserted babe, they carried her to their nest, and suckled and cherished her. And Menaka's babe thrived under the care of the *sakuntas*, until, one day, a holy man, known as Kanva mooni, saw her playing with the birds.

He approached closer to see this strange sight, and, as he came near the *sakuntas* moved away from the human child, and Kanva understood that they resigned the babe to him. So he carried her to his sister, Goutami, who lived with him in his *ashram*, and they adopted the child, and called her Sakuntala, after the birds.

Kanva and Goutami brought her up with loving care, and shielded her from all knowledge of the world, and she grew to maidenhood in the *ashram*, as a lotus grows to loveliness in a peaceful lake. Priyambada and Anushua, the daughters of two hermits who were *chelas* (disciples) of Kanva mooni, were her constant companions, and, hand in hand, they spent the golden days of youth in the virgin forest which surrounded the *ashram*.

All in the hermitage loved Sakuntala. Her beauty had the impress of purity upon it, and made them think of the *paris* of the immortal world. But the maiden grew up innocently unconscious of her beauty, and spent her days in the duties of a simple sylvan life. In the morning she gathered flowers from her garden, for the worship of God, then fed her pets and friends, the *animals and birds of the forest*. She called the gentle deer her children, the baby-elephants her brothers and sisters, and the many birds her grandchildren. She gave a name to each, and all knew her voice and came when she called, and understood what she said. In the afternoon, she tended her garden, watering the plants, and gathering choicest flowers, and making them into garlands for the evening *pūja*. And ever, as she worked and played, her heart

weaved the song of divine love into the web of her life.

So, time passed on, and Sakuntala, Priyamhada and Anushua were grown maidens, and they sat in the forest one afternoon, making garlands of flowers. A beetle buzzed around Sakuntala and disturbed her so that she cried. "Oh, drive away this *bhramar*!" (beetle.)

One of her friends said laughingly: "Just think of the great Maharajah Dushmanta. He is the only one who can rescue us from our enemies."

"Don't tease!" responded Sakuntala.

"It is not teasing," replied her friend. "The Maharajah frees the deer from the fierce tigers. He is a true knight, and helps all who seek his aid. Why should he not rescue you from this giant beetle?"

Dushmanta Maharajah sat on the Lunar throne at Hastinagar, and he was a mighty hunter and often roamed the jungle, to exercise his skill in shooting. He was out hunting that afternoon, and had followed a deer. He left his escort, and found the deer entering the *ashram*. Walking to the garden, he heard his name spoken, and parted the branches, to see who called. It was in the spring, and the *topoban* looked its best. Flowers of various colours bloomed on the banks of the crystal river, which ran swiftly through the garden. The trees lifted up their new leaves to the skies. All nature was rejoicing in the bright afternoon sun.

Dushmanta's reflections had been "Truly, this is a happy world. Peaceful and happy is this *ashram*. No sorrows or troubles can enter here, no shadows depress," but, when he parted the bushes, and saw Sakuntala, he said to himself: "Such beauty comes only from the Kingdom of Beauty!"

He approached the maidens, and Sakuntala's eyes and his met, and the ardent admiration of the stranger's gaze made the maiden blush and drop her long-lashed eyelids.

Dushmanta spoke: "I heard my name, and hence I came, and shall be happy if I can serve you."

"Who are you?" asked Priyamhada.

"Why, you mentioned my name!" answered the knight in surprise. "I am

Dushmanta Maharaj."

Priyambada and Anushua noticed that his eloquent eyes were absorbed in Sakuntala's beauty, and that she sat with down-cast eyes and blushing cheeks, so now they turned to her, and said, mischievously: "Why don't you tell him?"

Sakuntala raised her head, and said indignantly: "How can you be so unkind?"

The handsome knight entreated to be told what had vexed the lovely maiden, and her friends told him how a giant beetle had hummed and buzzed and flown round Sakuntala.

"Where is the offending insect, that I may slay him?" cried the knight, and the three girls laughed merrily.

Then the Maharajah seated himself beside them, on the velvety grass, and helped them with their garlands, but Priyambada and Anushua saw that he picked out all the choicest flowers for Sakuntala, and that all his prettiest speeches were for Sakuntala, and that his eyes were fixed on Sakuntala, so, presently they rose and left the pair together.

The golden sun was sinking, and his rosy rays were tinting all the world with evening glory, but Dushmanta thought that the loveliest feature of nature there was this sweet woodland maid.

Then he spoke to her of love, and asked her to be his, vowing that she would make him the happiest man on earth, and she should be his Queen, his only one, the dream, and guiding star of all his days.

Sakuntala answered shyly, "My father is away. When he returns, you may ask him." But her sweet eyes looked into his, and told Dushmanta all he longed to know.

They went into the cottage, and Goutami welcomed the king, and he accepted their hospitality, and stayed beneath their humble roof. Dushmanta could not tear himself away from Sakuntala's loveliness, and lingered in the *ashram* many days, awaiting her father.

But Kanva *moon*i did not return, and the Maharajah durst not tarry

longer, because his kingdom needed him, so he pleaded with the hermits his love for Sakuntala, and hers for him. At last the hermits and Goutami consented, and Dushmanta married Sakuntala by Gandharva rites.

It was evening, and Chandra, the Moon, floated majestically in the sky, and, under his silver brilliance, lovelier grew the forest world, but loveliest of all was the fair maiden, Sakuntala, who pledged herself to Dushmanta, kinliest King, and bravest knight.

A bed of flowers was made, and the cottage was adorned with the perfumed blossoms of the *ashram*, and the queen of flowers was Sakuntala. Dushmanta drew her to his heart and said: "Thou art mine, my dearest, come, let us talk of love."

The moon smiled in the sky, the flowers bloomed, and the happy husband's heart was filled with joy, as he gazed at his bride, and said: "We know that love alone has brought us together, and that the world is made of love, and we shall ever live together in love."

Dushmanta spent a few days with his bride, and they were very happy. Then he spoke of returning to his kingdom, Hastinagar, to his duties as a king. Sakuntala's face grew sad and pale, as she asked: "Why must you go? Why must we part?" and her great black eyes were full of tears, and her pretty lips quivered.

Dushmanta caught her to his heart, and said:

"My queen beloved, I leave my heart behind. You are my life, my joy, my second soul, but Duty calls. I am a King, and state and people claim my care. As soon as I arrive at my capital, I shall send an escort to bring you home to me, my love. But you are so happy here," he added, with a smile, "that I fear you will forget me, and not care to come."

Sakuntala turned to him, in trembling grief, and answered:

"No, no, my King, my lord! Oh, my heart shrinks from this parting, for I am but a poor hermit's daughter, and you are the ruler of a great kingdom, and I fear that, among the cares and distractions of your high estate, you will forget me."

Dushmanta drew her closer to his heart, and said reproachfully :

"My little wife, am I not here, away from State and Capital because of you? I long to see you on my throne, and my people will be proud of you, their Queen."

Then he told her of all the dazzling grandeur which would gild her life, and of the rich silks, and pearls and gold and gems, which should frame her fairness.

But Sakuntala answered sadly: "These matter not, my lord. I want only you and all your love." And she hid her face upon his breast and wept, and her tears fell upon his hand, and her beautiful form trembled in his arms.

The King said: "Oh, my naughty little wife, you make our parting too sad! How shall I go and leave you thus?"

Sakuntala looked into his eyes and said mournfully. "I never wept before. There are no partings in our peaceful *ashram*."

Dushmanta laughed tenderly, and kissed away her tears, and said consolingly: "My loved one, our son shall be the Ruler, when you and I are old and we shall return to this *topoban* and spend the evening of our lives together, in happiness and prayer. Now, my wife, my Queen, take this ring."

He placed on Sakuntala's left hand a ring which bore his name, set in gems, and said:

"My bride, I place this on your finger. Fear not, do not be sad. As soon as you have finished reading the letters of this ring, reading one letter a day, my messengers will be waiting at the door, to escort you to my kingdom, which will be proud to welcome you as their Queen."

Sakuntala answered softly: "My heart breaks at saying goodbye. I can only beg of you, my King, my lord, not to forget me." And he kissed her, again, and left her, with the promise of the escort to fetch her to him.

Several days later, Kanva *moon* returned from his pilgrimage, and the hermit and his sister, Goutami, told him how the Maharajah Dushmanta had come and spent some time amongst them, and had married Sakuntala by Gandharva rites. And Kanva rejoiced, and said:

"Friends and sister dear, you could have found no better suitor Sakuntala is my adopted child, and has bloomed to womanhood in this poor *ashram* but her character is pure and beautiful As the shining of a star, at dawn, tells the earth the morn is nigh, even so a woman's truth and purity dispel all darkness from a man's life, and speak to him of brighter, happier things Sakuntala's virtue is not destined to be hidden in a hermit's hut Our country will be enriched by her life ' And all waited in happy anticipation of the escort

One afternoon, Sakuntala was seated on the verandah of Goutami's hut, gazing at the ring on her finger, and thinking of her husband, when a mendicant hermit came and begged for food So absorbed in thought was Sakuntala, that she did not hear him, though he asked several times

The hungry *moon* lost his temper, and shouted in a rage

"Dare you ignore me, in this heartless style? May the one of whom you are thinking forget you!"

Then he strode angrily away, but, before he reached the garden gate, Priyamhada and Anushua intercepted him and fell at his feet, imploring

"Oh, *Moonbar*, kind Sir, pardon her, for she is thinking of one who is dearer to her than life itself!"

Durhasa, the *moon*, replied testily "I cannot pardon her, because she took no notice of me, a hungry, thirsty pilgrim Where is her charity?"

"Kind Sir, good Sir," the girls entreated, "we shall atone, come with us," and they led him to a shady seat and gave him a cooling drink and a sumptuous meal, and fanned him, and waited on him with devotion When all his bodily wants had been supplied, they again implored

"Revered Sir, great *Moonbar*, pray, pray, forgive our friend "

Durhasa was now appeased, but spoken words can never be recalled He thought awhile, then found a way to mitigate his curse, and said

"The one she thinks of will remember her, if she has a souvenir "

"Priyamhada and Anushua were comforted by these words, for they knew that the ring on Sakuntala's finger was Dushmanta's parting gift

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Dushmanta drew her closer to his heart, and said reproachfully :

"My little wife, am I not here, away from State and Capital because you? I long to see you on my throne, and my people will be proud of you their Queen."

Then he told her of all the dazzling grandeur which would gild her life and of the rich silks, and pearls and gold and gems, which should frame her fairness.

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began to droop and grow pale. Kanva *moon*i and Goutami Devi grew anxious for their child as the months went by, for Sakuntala was expecting her first born, and her time of motherhood was drawing near. At length, Kanva thought it advisable to wait no longer for the promised embassy, so he said to Sakuntala :

"My child, you are Dushmanta's wife and Queen ! You can go to your husband without his call."

"Father," Sakuntala replied, "he told me he would send for me. I shall await his word."

Nearer drew the time of her expectancy, and Kanva again spoke :

"My beloved child, a King's son and heir should be born in his father's State. I must send you to Hastinagar."

"No, father, no," she entreated, "What would his people think? The Maharajah has sent no messengers, no escort, how can I go, and wound his royal dignity?"

The holy sage's heart was sore for the child of his adoption. He understood her delicate thought for the King, her husband, but he believed that cares of State engrossed Dushmanta and that, if Sakuntala could but be persuaded to go to the court, all would be well. So he answered :

"Dear child, if you do not care to go without a suitable entourage, as the wife and Queen of Dushmanta, I shall send you as my daughter, a humble hermit's child."

But Sakuntala's heart shrank within her, from venturing thus unhidden into the unknown. All her young life, in the *topoban*, had been free from care and sorrow, until these past few months, and now how much she suffered. What weary hours and days of loneliness ! What disappointed hopes, and cruel suspense ! Was love like this ? And was this love ? Those golden days of bliss, when he and she were one, had it ever been, or was it all a dream ? Or were they real, and this separation and waiting some terrible phantasm of her mind, some awful dream, which would later fade away ? And, if all were real and true, and love must suffer, then why comes love at all ?

faints with dread. Oh, dear friends, Priyamhada and Anushua, will you remember me? I shall never forget either of you, but shall ever hold your memory in my heart, and love you both."

With a great effort, she released herself from their sorrowful embrace, and said in a broken voice: "Take care of Goutami Devi and my dear father." Then she placed her flower garlands in their hands, and said

"When evening comes, lay these at the feet of God, for me, and pray for me, in the *arati*, for, though I shall be far away, in prayer our spirits may ever be united."

At the gate of the *ashram*, she fell at Kanva moon's feet, to say goodbye, but her courage failed her and, instead, she wept and said:

"Oh, father, don't leave me, don't let me go! I cannot bear this parting. You have been so kind a father to me, I love you and my dear aunt so much. And oh, I feel so frightened, and so sad!"

Kanva lifted her up in his arms. His aged eyes were full of tears, and her cry cut his soul in twain. He put his hand on her head, and said:

"My child, my poor child, you have lived such a secluded life, no wonder you feel fearful. I shall come a little way with you."

So he went with her, and, as they walked along, he tried to cheer her, but the cloud which shadowed Sakuntala's heart could not be dispersed, and he thought within himself: "This bird of the forest *topoban* will not be happy in a gilded cage. This woodland flower will pine and fade within a city's walls. This gentle deer will start and tremble at the worldly winds of court intrigues and whisperings."

Aloud, he ever strove to comfort her, but when, for the third time, he tried to say farewell, and she again implied that he must leave her, he answered:

"Sakuntala, my child, I must now return. The night draws near, and I must go to my evening prayers."

Then, to his relief, Sakuntala resigned herself to the inevitable, and, kneeling before him, said, calmly and sadly:

"Father, bless me. I need your blessing more to-day than I ever did.



SARINTALA—His age & eyes were full of tears and her cry full of wail in the air

Forgive me, father, if I have ever been an undutiful child. May your love and prayers ever follow me."

Kanva answered, through a mist of tears :

"Oh, dear child, there is nothing to forgive. I never thought a child's affection could be so sweet. I vowed myself a *brahmachari* (celibate) and my cottage hearth was bare and lonely. God sent you, and life took on another shape. My hermit-cot became a home of bliss, the flowers bloomed, and the birds sang, because you tended them. You made my home a home indeed, and the word 'father' fell from your lips like heavenly music. My child, I never shall forget you, and my affection and prayers shall follow you all through your life "

"Father," whispered Sakuntala, "I feel so fearful. What will the Maharajah's palace be like? Everything there will be so new, so different."

"Dear child," the *moon* said, and faith was in his voice, "the One above, who orders all our lives, will watch over you. Be kind to the poor, a mother to those in service, a daughter to the aged, and to your husband be his all. Never be vexed, impatient or jealous. Even if there are other wives, remember that he is your husband, your *devata* (God). Be faithful and loyal to him, even in the mearest trifle. And, if ever proud thoughts tempt you, remember the humble *topoban*, where all your early years were spent."

Once again, the aged saint took Sakuntala's hands in his and blessed her. Once more she touched Kanva's feet, and said goodbye. Then she walked forward, with her guides, and the *moon* watched her figure disappear. And then he walked along the river bank and told his beads and prayed for her, and said to himself : "Is a child's love so sweet as this? She is not my own, and yet my affection for her is so strong, and I feel as if this parting has taken something from my life. What must such sorrow be for those whose children are their very own?"

Kanva *moon* could not bear the thought of the *ashram* with Sakuntala no longer there, so he went on a pilgrimage, and was not seen or heard of by anyone for many days.

Sakuntala, her aunt, Goutami, and two hermits whom she called uncles, journeyed on foot to the capital of Dushmanta. Their progress was slow, on account of Sakuntala's health. They bathed in the river, every morning, ate their meals by the way-side, and, at night, slept under trees. After a week they entered the city of Hastinagar. Sakuntala's nervous depression was great, and she clung to her aunt.

"My child," said Goutami Devi, "you are not strong, and the long journey has wearied you. We shall rest, and refresh ourselves, before going to the *darbar*."

"Dear aunt, I want no food, no rest," answered Sakuntala, her bright eyes and flushed face showing the feverish anxiety of her mind. "Let us see the end of our journey, and go at once to my lord, the King. I long to see him, for he alone can give me rest and comfort."

Goutami looked anxiously into the beloved face of her child. Her heart ached for the girl's suffering, and she thought it would be better to end the long suspense, so she answered, affectionately :

"Loved daughter, you are right, and, as we are close to the palace gates, we shall see the Maharajah at once."

Sakuntala trembled so, with fatigue and agitation, that her limbs could barely support her, and Goutami was obliged to assist her. When they reached the entrance of the *darbar*, the ushers asked them their business there. The elder hermit replied :

"We two, *moonni* and *moonipatni*, wish to see the King."

The ushers answered :

"If you seek alms, you may have them, but you cannot approach His Majesty."

"Our business with the Maharajah is urgent," they pleaded. "We come from Kanva *moonni's ashram*."

The ushers consulted together, then replied :

"We know the Maharajah has great respect for Kanva *moonni*. We shall inform His Majesty that you are here."

A page carried the message to the throne, and returned to say that the Maharajah would see the hermits. The little group slowly approached the steps of the dais. Sakuntala's long veil concealed her face and figure, and sheltered her from the wondering gaze of the thousands of eyes that were turned towards the strangers. She felt their piercing stare, and longed for the sheltering arms of her husband, but she told herself that the ordeal would be only for a few minutes, and then would come a life time of happiness.

Now they were at the foot of the golden throne, and, after a courteous enquiry after Kanva mooni's health, the Maharajah awaited their request. The sound of the loved voice had thrilled Sakuntala, and the kind enquiry after their moonibar reassured her anxious guardians. The elder hermit said simply

"Sire, we have brought your wife from the *ashram*."

"My wife!" echoed the King, in a tone of genuine surprise. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Your Majesty," answered the two hermits, "we have brought your Maharani Sakuntala from her father's *ashram*."

"My good Sirs," said the King, "are you trying to jest with me? I have no Maharani, in any *ashram*."

"Sire," answered the elder hermit, and his tone was grave and reproachful, "your Majesty married our moonibar's daughter some months ago, while staying at the *ashram*."

The King looked at him in amazement and answered

"Revered Sir, you labour under some delusion. I never stayed at an *ashram*, that I remember, nor married any hermit's daughter."

"Your Majesty," entreated the second hermit, "this is a sorry jest. We have brought your Queen that your son and heir may be born in your capital. Give her a husband's welcome, and we shall return happily to the *topoban*."

"Holy Sirs!" exclaimed the King, "I cannot follow what you mean. For Kanva mooni, I have a deep reverence, but I never stayed in his *ashram*, nor married his daughter."

Dushmanta's tone was emphatic, and the hermits drew themselves up, in righteous indignation. This denial was a great insult. Goutami Devi turned to Sakuntala, and said

"My child, take the Maharajah's ring from off your finger, and show him the souvenir that he gave you."

At her words, the courtiers rose, with great curiosity, to see the ring, and a thrill of expectancy filled the *darbar*. Sakuntala raised her hand, to draw the ring from off her finger, but the ring was gone!

For an instant, she stood with both hands raised before her, and swayed and trembled, the target of those many curious, scornful eyes. Then she drew *her sari off her head and faced the King, a queenly virtuous figure of womanly* dignity, and now, where scorn and curiosity had been, there was admiration. The curling waves of jet black hair fell round her form in luxuriant profusion, and her wonderfully beautiful face was raised towards the King. Tears hung on the silken eye lashes, but the glorious eyes were opened wide and fixed upon his face as if she fain would read his heart.

Not the faintest gleam of recognition lighted the face of Dushmanta, who leaned forward on his throne, and looked wonderingly at her beauty.

"My King, my lord," Sakuntala cried, and all her soul was in her voice, "is this the welcome you promised me? Is it kingly to deny your plighted word? Is pure love despised in your kingdom? My husband, I gave myself to you, heart and soul. Is there no mercy in your heart? You are a King, and have everything the world can give, I am but a poor hermit's daughter."

But her words made no impression on Dushmanta. He answered coldly, "Madam, who are you? I know you not."

"Oh, my lord, my husband, do you deny me thus, to try me? Why make me suffer so? I want no kingdom, no position, no jewels. I want you, and you alone. Is a man's heart like iron? Do you forget and disown me? Ye gods in heaven, if I have been a true wife to this Maharajah, may he soon remember the past and be sorry for his denial of to-day."

Her piercing accents filled the court, but the effort, and the King's

persistent non recognition, were more than she could bear and she fell swooning to the floor. A loud, rumbling noise was heard, and the palace shook and rocked with an earthquake. The crown fell off Dushmanta's head, and crashed to the floor, its precious gems splintering into fragments. Fear and consternation filled every heart, and the courtiers said to each other "The gods are surely angry with our King."

Goutami Devi, weeping pitifully, knelt beside Sakuntala's prostrate form, while the two hermits broke into bitter reproaches, and addressed themselves indignantly to the Maharajah.

"You have insulted our *moon* *deb* Kanva, by denying your marriage with his daughter. Your repentance for this falsehood will be so great that you will forsake your throne and become a hermit. Do not forget our words."

Dushmanta had listened in silence to the hermit's upbraidings. No remembrance of Sakuntala came to him, but his heart was stirred by her beauty and the earnestness of her voice, and the thought flashed into his mind "Why cannot I claim her, as she claims me, for she looks born to be a queen." And then a second thought came "But no, they spoke of an expected heir. Some one has deserted her. Would that I could avenge her."

Goutami Devi and the two hermits helped Sakuntala out of the palace, and started to return with her to the *ashram*. But they had not gone far from the city when they were obliged to halt, for the shock and horror of the Maharajah's repudiation had completely unnerved Sakuntala, and her condition was pitiable. The little party bivouacked under a big tree, and Goutami prepared some food. Sakuntala felt neither hunger nor thirst, a great weariness possessed her, and, but for the unborn babe, she would have died of grief. She accepted some fruit, and struggled to eat it. Goutami Devi watched her, with a sinking heart, and her anxiety for her loved child increased when Sakuntala, presently, said

"You three must go back to the *topoban*."

Goutami forced a smile, and answered

"And you are coming with us, dear child."

"Oh, no, Devi, I can never show my face there again. I was always

known as 'happy Sakuntala', in the *ashram*, and I am not happy now, so I cannot return there " Then a terrible wave of grief and shame broke upon her heart and, throwing herself into Goutami's arms, she cried in awful anguish "Oh, aunt, dear aunt, what will everyone say, when they hear that I am deserted by my husband? Why did he reject me? Oh, my babe, my unborn babe, are you never to know a father's love?"

Goutami had no words to comfort her She could but hold her in her arms, and weep with her

"*Dev!*," sobbed Sakuntala "is love always scorned like this in kingdoms?"

"No, child, no," answered Goutami, through her tears, "some cruel fancy obsesses the King Try not to think of your sorrow Live for your child "

All their persuasions could not induce Sakuntala to accompany her aunt and the hermits back to the *ashram* Goutami and the others wondered what had become of the ring, and questioned each other how it could have slipped off Sakuntala's finger, for she cried, saying "It never left my finger after he placed it there, as a souvenir I am forsaken by my husband Sakuntala shall never be seen as a deserted wife, in the *ashram* "

Her fatigue and grief were so extreme that they knew not what to do, so they decided to spend the night where they were, and see what the morning would bring forth They were on the outskirts of the forest, and a storm was threatening, so they contrived a shelter with branches and grass, and Goutami and the hermits soon slept, for they were tired and over wrought

Sakuntala sat watching the black clouds and vivid flashes of lightning The gloomy night seemed a reflection of her own saddened soul, and she could neither sleep nor rest She left the sheltering tree, and began to pace backwards and forwards, now here, now there The feeble life, pulsing within her, struck new chords in her heart, and her thoughts wandered to her own mother, whom she had never seen or known A passionate longing to feel her mother's arms about her, and to rest her fevered head upon her breast, possessed her, and, in a frenzied paroxysm of grief, she cried aloud

"Mother, mother, hear me, come to me! Do you love me? I have never

called you 'mother', never known your love, but now my heart yearns for you. My heart is breaking, my body aches, my life struggles within me. Mother, where are you, and where is your love? Come to me, hold me in your arms. Come, mother, come!"

Sakuntala's piercing cries awakened Goutami, and the hermits began to search for her, but just then the storm burst, and all their efforts were in vain, for, in the darkness and deluge which followed, they lost all trace of Sakuntala. Late, next day, they sadly and sorrowfully gave up their hopeless quest, and turned their steps back to the *ashram*.

Maharajah Dushmanta could not forget the beautiful face of her whom the hermits had declared to be his wife, and, although he could not understand their accusation, he felt that he, as a knight, had been guilty of disrespect to a *devi*, in allowing the little party to go away unaided. Who could the man be, who had married such a young and lovely maiden? Virtue shone from her luminous black eyes, which had been raised so appealingly to his. Again and again, the thrilling accents of her voice rang in his ears. "I gave you my love, and all I had!" Whatever did it mean? Who could be the one who had impersonated him, and used his name? Would that he had not let them go from his court! Such were often Dushmanta's reflections when the voice and eyes of Sakuntala haunted him. All his chivalrous soul rose up within him in horror, for her sorrow, and he could not drive her beautiful face and form from his mind.

One afternoon, not long after his rejection of Sakuntala, two fishermen were found with a ring that bore the Maharajah's name in precious stones. It was concluded that they were robbers in disguise, who had stolen the jewel, so they were arrested and taken to the capital. The court-officers recognised the ring as one the King had always worn, and they carried it to their lord, in *darbar*.

Dushmanta carelessly took the jewel in his hand and looked at it. Durhasa's curse was lifted, and memory given back to him. "Sakuntala, oh, Sakuntala!" burst from his lips, in tones of anguished woe. The royal cry resounded through the *darbar*, and the courtiers surged around the throne, to learn what ailed their lord. With the ring in his hand, and great sobs shaking his manly

frame, he told them all the story of how he had seen and loved the daughter of Kanva mooni, had married her, and meant to bring her to Hastinagar, to be his queen

The fishermen were sent for, and asked where they got the ring, and they explained that they had been fishing in the Ganga river, (Ramganga, its present name) and had caught some large fish in their net, and, when they were dividing them for sale, they found the ring in one of the fish. The King rewarded them, and then he cried

"Where are those hermits? and where is that *devi*? Go, search for her. She was my Sakuntala, my wife, and I disowned her. Send forth courtiers to Kanva mooni's ashram, and find your Queen."

The ministers hastened to obey, for their grief-stricken King strode up and down the *darbar* hall and rent the palace with his lamentations, saying

"If she is not found, I shall not rule this kingdom. If she is lost, do what you will with the throne and State. This line of Chandra Vansa shall end. My Sakuntala, my bride, my wife, the mother of my child, where are you? Oh, Time, stand still, and let me find her. If she is lost and gone, may Kanva mooni curse me. Eternity, roll back your portals, and let me end this mortal life. Fall on me, all ye gods, and annihilate me."

Terrible were his grief and remorse. The courtiers returned. Sakuntala had never again been seen or heard of, in Kanva mooni's *topoban*. Messengers were hurried forth, to search the land, and the King knew neither sleep nor rest. He craved for Sakuntala, and, in his anguish, he called for painters, and at last found one whose soul leaped up and met the King's.

Together they worked, King and painter. The word pictures poured from the King's lips, in heart wrung accents, of immortal, suffering love, and the artist caught the inspiration, and the canvas grew to life beneath his brush. Never before had pictures been painted in India, but, under Dushmanti's direction, the art of depicting life and beauty sprang into existence. Sakuntala lived again, upon the canvas, in the sakuntali's nest, beside the brook, weaving garlands in the peaceful ashram, pled to the King in simple

Gandharva rite All these were shown, and more, for Dushmanta's one desire was to vindicate Sakuntala to all the world

Thus, four years passed away, and never came a word of Sakuntala Dushmanta left his kingdom and, taking the beloved pictures, retreated to the forest and there, in a humble cottage, lived the life of an anchorite, doing penance for his denial of Sakuntala, and around him were the pictures of her whom he loved so well and mourned so truly

One lovely afternoon, when the forest lay hushed in all the promise and hope of early spring, the hermit-king tended his garden, and, as he dug and delved, two ladies and a little boy passed by, and he heard the name of Sakuntala Dushmanta called the faithful friend, who shared his exile, and said "Go, follow them, and question why they speak of Sakuntala " And he held his heart until the man returned and said "The elder lady answered, 'We spoke to the little boy of his mother, who was reared by sakuntas, and hence her name ' "

Then Dushmanta knew that his long lost love was found, and he hurried forth, in pursuit of the trio But they had gone some distance and he feared he had missed them, when a strange sight met his eyes Within a glade a child gambolled with a tiger cub and, near by, the fierce tiger mother snarled and grinned Dushmanta saw that the silken, jet black curls, the laughing eyes, the dainty grace, the fair and lovely, childish face were all Sakuntala's His heart stood still There was no doubt that this was his son! He breathed an inward prayer, then called the child "Come here little boy!" The little lad looked up and laughed The tie of blood drew him, and, forsaking his forest friends, he ran, with out stretched arms, to Dushmanta The tigress purred to her cub, and both disappeared

Dushmanta held the boy and kissed him, and two ladies came from behind a sheltering tree The King, with hated breath, told how he had found the child playing with the cub, and the fierce mother animal watching The ladies laughed, and answered, unconcerned

"This little boy fears no animals His mother was reared by sakuntas and, like her, he understands all animals and birds, and talks with them "

"Where is his mother?" asked the King impatiently

"She lives in a cottage behind those trees," they answered, pointing out a part of the forest unknown to him "Oh, she is a great friend of ours," they cried, "and we love and reverence her, for she is a saint "

They told him of her perfect life, and how she radiated joy and peace on all who knew her Dushmanta's heart thrilled at their words, but he dared not reveal himself He had found his Sakuntala, but his humility would not let him claim her The pure lily bloom of her life seemed full and complete and in it was no place for him He had rejected and disowned her, and this was his retribution

When the ladies ceased their eulogies he humbly asked if the child might sometimes visit him, and the little boy laughed merrily Next day, he came, and Dushmanta held him in his arms and asked

"How does your mother kiss you?"

The boy answered "So," and pouted his sweet red lips, and the King pressed his, in hungry longing upon the baby mouth which Sakuntala's lips had sealed in love Again and again, the child came, and always asked

"Where did you get these pictures? They are all my mother!"

"Take me to your mother, will you not?" said Dushmanta, one day, for his heart ached for his wife and he longed to lay his head at her feet and plead for mercy

The boy said, "Yes, I shall, and mother will be pleased to see you Come," and he led his father by his hand to his mother's cottage, little knowing that it was his own father, and that he had given up his throne, and all he had, for the mother whom the child spoke of

Sakuntala had heard of the pictures from her child, and she knew who the stranger was, and that it was her love which drew him to her And, when she saw him coming towards her home, with their son holding his hand, her heart beat gladly, but she made no sign nor sound, and stood quietly there, watching him advance

The little cottage was covered with creepers and all were in bloom, for it

was summer-time, and the garden was a mass of loveliness. Sakuntala stood in the verandah, with flowers all round her, and Dushmanta saw her there, so lovely, sweet and pure. It seemed like that night, so long ago, when she placed her hand in his, and they became man and wife, by simple ceremony. He stood and gazed. She was the same, and yet so different! A newer, fuller grace was hers. The maiden brightness all was gone! Her face was sad, but oh, how chaste and peaceful. The luminous eyes were mirrors of purity, the gently-heaving breast a haven of peace and rest. But he was not worthy of her! He drove her from him! "She is a *devi* now. I cannot touch her," he thought.

He had gained the verandah steps, and Sakuntala came forward to meet him. He fell at her feet, and cried, brokenly, "Angel wife, I am not worthy of your love! Pity and pardon me!" and his tears bathed her feet.

Sakuntala stooped and raised him from the ground, and the tenderness of her voice filled his heart with joy. She touched his feet, and said

"My husband, do not kneel to me, do not touch my feet. You are my King and lord. I gave you myself, and I am yours for ever, but a poor hermit's daughter could not be Queen of a kingdom. Now I know and understand. Forgive the words I spoke."

She drew him to a rustic seat, and, falling on her knees before him, she paid her wifely homage, worshipping him as a god, and murmuring, joyfully, "My husband, my *devata*!"

"My love, my love," cried Dushmanta, "unsay those words. My punishment has been almost greater than I could bear. Only the faint hope of again meeting you kept me alive. Even now, I cannot understand how it was I did not remember you. I have suffered bitterly, these last four years. You had our boy, Sakuntala, but I was alone! Forgive me, my wife, and come with me to Hastinagar, and be my Queen."

But Sakuntala begged him to allow her to live her forest life, as a moon's daughter. She said

"I am ever yours, my husband, and whatever is your wish is my law. But

I am only a *moon's* daughter, and I feel that the grandeur of a palace is not meant for me. Let us live in a peaceful *topoban*."

He agreed to this, but pleaded :

"Come with me, just for a short time, my wife, to show my subjects how much I love you, to vindicate my honour, and afterwards we shall retire to an *ashram*."

She consented, and it seemed to Dushmanta as if the heavens had opened for him and he gazed into the heart of happiness. When Sakuntala sat by Dushmanta, he lovingly took her left hand in his, and placed the ring on the third finger, once more, and said :

"Sakuntala, my beautiful, patient and good Sakuntala, this ring has tried your love and virtue, this ring put me into the depths of suffering, but, Sakuntala, this ring has united us again to-day, so take it back. What was yours, is yours again, and will always be yours."

And Dushmanta told her the story of the ring, and how it had been found. Then, they journeyed to Hastinagar, and the people rejoiced to see their King again, and, by his side, his lovely, saintly Queen and the beautiful little Prince.

For a few years, Dushmanta reigned again, and Maharani Sakuntala was loved by all his subjects. She brought pure and unselfish love as the most priceless jewel to her husband's court, and she gave generously of her love to all his people.

Enthroned by his side, she reigned in Hastinagar by the mystic right of love and virtue, the greatest Queen India has ever seen. The sweet refinement of her saintly life, her gentle, kindly words, made themselves felt throughout the kingdom. Hastinagar benefited by her sway. The rare flower of the *topoban*, perfected by suffering and sorrow, scattered its fragrance all over India, and its perfume has spread over the world and will last for all eternity.

Dushmanta worshipped his wife. "I found a shy, woodland maid," he said, "and married her, and she is my angel-wife."

When Bharat, their son, was old enough, Dushmanta placed him on the throne, and returned to the *ashram*, with Sakuntala, to lead a simple life, till

God called them away from the earth.

Bharat became a great King, and reigned as Emperor on the throne of Prayag, and all the country was called, after him, Bharat-Varsha (Bharat's Land). But Sakuntala's son is remembered more for his holiness than for his greatness, for his piety was remarkable. To this day, there is a place near Hardwar, on the Ganges, called *Bharat-Ashram*, which is revered because Bharat, the King, son of Sakuntala and Dushmanta, retired there, after he had said farewell to the world, and there spent many years in meditation, to meet his God and Maker.



SAVITRI

Savitri was a princess who lived many hundreds of years ago. Her name has its place in the golden legends of ideals of Hindu women. Even now, the very name fills Hindu hearts with the remembrance of a love which was so pure and strong that it conquered the King of Death.

Savitri was the only child of the Maharajah Ashwapati of Ahanti. He and his Queen had been married for many years. Though they were happy, a grief of their lives was that they had no son. Often Ashwapati besought the gods, with tears and prayers, to send him an heir. Once, as he prayed thus before the God of Fire, the goddess Savitri was seen standing in the heart of the flames. Knowing what the Maharajah's prayer was for, she granted him his wish, and told him he would have a daughter, who would bring joy and glory to his kingdom and to him.

The Maharani of Ahanti gave birth to a little daughter, after ten months of the *hom* (sacred fire). She was named Savitri after the goddess. The little Princess grew to be a very lovely maiden, tenderly cherished by her parents, and the hope of the people of Ahanti.

In those far-off days, Indian ladies were not kept in seclusion, and many of them were highly educated and accomplished. Savitri would one day succeed her father, so Ashwapati Maharajah supervised her education himself, not only that she might hold her own with the most cultured in the land, but also that she might learn to administer the kingdom for the welfare and advancement of its subjects. It was a pretty sight to see the young Princess listening seriously to the learned professors and sages who aided in her education.

The Maharani chose several girls, of noble family, to be her child's constant companions and Princess Savitri's days were happy, and her life flowed on like a gentle stream of joy.

The Princess sometimes accompanied her parents, when they visited *topobans* or *ashrams*, far and near. In the forest, in those long ago days, *moonis* and *rishis* lived in community, and the holiness of their lives attracted kings, princesses and noble ladies, who came to such hermitages to lead while a simple life.

Savitri was enchanted with the peaceful retreat. The earnestness of the daily life there, the chanting of the saints, the atmosphere of prayer and peace, all enraptured her.

On one occasion, the young Princess went with her girl friends to a *topoban*. It was at the foot of the Himalayas. The maidens wandered freely in the beautiful forest, which surrounded the hermitage, gathering flowers and fruits, and making the old trees feel young, with their fresh voices and silvery laughter. The birds twittered with glee to see the merry girls, and the little squirrels played hide and seek with them in the long grass.

One late afternoon, when the sun had finished his day's work, and was on the point of saying goodbye to the *topoban*, Savitri, tired of wandering, sat alone on the bank of a clear and shallow stream, making jasmine flowers into a garland for her evening *puja*. As she worked, her eyes watched the lengthening shadows on the opposite bank. Presently, she noticed the figure of a man, emerging from the deeper forest. As he came further into the sunlight, she discerned a handsome youth, dressed like a hermit, in a *garooah* coloured *dhoti*, and carrying a sheaf of wheat on his shoulder.

The grace and dignity of his bearing struck Savitri's eyes, and she continued to observe him as he walked forward to the path which ran along the bank. And, as she sat there, unconsciously watching him, he became aware of her presence and looked towards her. The young man slowly stepped down the bank, and their eyes met. He saw a vision of perfect beauty, and she saw the depth of his love. And, as eyes gazed into eyes across the narrow stream, their souls, predestined from all eternity to complete each other, awakened.

The thick forest lay silent around them, as if it held the moment too precious and sacred for sound. Even the wind held its breath, as the two souls spoke.

to each other in silence. Then Savitri veiled her eyes, with their black-fringed lids, and the first blushes of love heightened her wondrous charm. When the youth sighed a deep breath of happiness, the birds in the forest trilled with joy. It seemed as if all nature rejoiced with them. The sun smiled a brighter ray, the doves cooed and a rippling breeze stirred the forest and stream, scattering the fragrance of bael-blossoms. Savitri trembled like a lotus in a wind-swept lake and bent forward to hide her blushing face, and, as she did so, a garland of delicate, snow-white jasmine dropped from her hand, into the water, and was borne across by the gentle breeze. The youth smiled, as he watched the floating flowers. They seemed to him a token of love and trust, as they came over the crystal-clear stream. When they reached his side of the brook, leaning downwards he reverently lifted the fragile blossoms from the water, and held them, for an instant, to his forehead. Their fragrance and purity seemed but a reflection of the stainless soul of her to whom he now silently vowed his manhood, and he breathed a prayer that he might be worthy of her. Then, rising, he clasped his hands, in homage to the love-thrilled, trembling girl on the opposite bank, and disappeared along the path, carrying away with him Savitri's snow-white flowers.

The Princess sat on dreaming, and knowing not that she dreamed. A little bird perched on her shoulder and peeped at the blushing face, and flew up to tell the trees that Prince Charming had come, and stolen the maiden's heart. The bulbuls danced gaily from branch to branch, and sang a wonderful new song of love. The old peepul tree, under whose shade she had rested, to make her garland, whispered to Vishnu of the maiden who dreamed of love. Then the gentle breeze roused her, with a fluttering of her silken *sari*, and Savitri finished her garland and went to make her evening offering to her god.

A few days later, the Princess and her companions discovered a little hut in the *topoban*, where a blind old man lived with his wife. The royal maiden was full of sympathy for the aged pair. They told her that their son, Satyaban, was devoted to them, and worked hard to support them, and was the comfort

of their lives. While the girls were thus talking, there came Satyahan, with some wood from the forest, and Savitri recognized her knight of the stream, and he, his lady of the fragrant jasmine flowers.

Shy and frequent were the glances which Savitri and Satyahan cast at each other, and the sharp eyes of the Princess's companions noticed their bashfulness and soon discovered that love had conquered both. And, as they returned to their own dwelling, the girls congratulated Savitri on her woodland hero.

The maidens, who listened to it with great interest, heard from the other hermits the history of the late ruler of Abanti. The noble appearance of Satyahan and his parents spoke of their high birth. The girls were much, and pleasantly, surprised to learn that the old man was the exiled King of Abani and his son, the Crown Prince. Satyahan met several times, before the Princess's return to Abanti, and each meeting increased the attraction they felt for each other.

Now, when the maidens reached home, they told the Maharani about the blind and exiled King and his son, and Savitri's blushes soon showed the mother that her child's future was in peril. So she confided her suspicions to her husband, and begged him to hasten the *syambara* and to invite Prince Satyahan to it. The Maharajah heard his wife with dismay. He had determined a great alliance for Savitri, and his pride rebelled against her choice of a penniless and unfortunate King's son.

"No, no," he replied, in answer to the Maharani's entreaties not to sacrifice their daughter for wealth, "Savitri is my heiress. She will, one day, sit on the throne of Abanti. Her husband must be no exiled beggar."

The parents now looked anxious and sad, for Savitri worshipped them and knew that this marriage would not please them, but her heart was no longer her own and she knew that, loving Satyahan as she did, she could never marry another. And the Maharajah loved his daughter so well that he dreaded to force her obedience.

A few days later, Narad came on a visit to Abanti. He was an old friend of the Maharajah and had known Savitri from her childhood. So Ashwapati

this unfortunate Prince, and are widowed so soon, what will become of my ancient name and my kingdom? You know that he whom you marry will be to me as a son, and your marriage will give an heir to my throne. Oh, child, do not disappoint me. Be kind to your parents, sacrifice your wishes, for the good of my people."

"Father," she cried, and the earnestness of her voice thrilled the two listeners, "were it my wishes only, I would gladly yield them all to make you, my beloved Sire, and the people of Abanti happy. I love the exiled Prince with all my heart and soul. Our souls have met, and in spirit I am his. He, and he alone, can be the master of my life, the lord of my heart. Forgive me, loved and kind father, I can marry no other."

The sweet voice ceased, and she bowed her head and veiled her blushing face beneath her gold edged *sari*.

'Moonibar, speak again to my child,' begged the Maharajah. 'Plead with her.' I do not wish her to marry one who is doomed to an early death."

"Dear Princess," began the saint affectionately, but there was a ring of reluctance in his voice, for Savitri's fervent avowal of love had touched his heart, "remember your father's declining years. Remember, you are his only child."

"Great *Rishi*, revered Sir," answered the Princess, sinking on her knees before them and clasping her hands, "Oh, kind King, and best of fathers, hear me once more! A year's happiness with Satyaban will be everlasting happiness to me. A good woman must be true to her love. He is mine, soul of my soul, sun of my life. Please, father, be kind. Do not ask me to forget him. Do not forbid me to marry him."

The slender form trembled and swayed, with the strength of her appeal and her father sighed heavily.

Narad replied, "Child, child, reflect, what is one short year of happiness against a long life of widowhood?"

"Ah, *Dev!*" and the Princess's heart was in her voice, "the year may be short, but the happiness will be heavenly to me, and its memory will live for ever! And, if it is written for me to be a widow, I shall be one, no matter whom

I marry Great Rishi," and her voice was impelling in its sweetness and pleading, "bless me, that I may prove a virtuous woman Bless me, and console my father "

Narad was conquered The sweet face, the tearful eyes, the earnest, thrilling voice, had touched his heart Turning to the King, he said "My friend, love like hers is heaven sent and sacred Let the Princess marry Satyahan " Then, blessing the kneeling Savitri, Narad left her and her father together

The Queen heard with joy that Savitri was to be allowed to follow her own choice and soon Ahanti was preparing for the marriage of its loved Princess The Gurus (priests) and the wise men were consulted by the high officials and relatives, and they fixed the most auspicious of all auspicious hours, 3 o'clock in the morning, as the time for the nuptials The marriage was celebrated with great splendour, and, at the festival which followed, the nobles and courtiers of Ahanti were charmed with the gracious personality of the Prince "Surely," they thought "still happier fortune will be ours, when Princess Savitri sits on the throne of her ancestors, with such a noble lord as her consort "

But these bright hopes were all dispelled when, the wedding festivities ended Prince Satyahan came to take leave of his parents in law, before returning to the *topoban*

"No, no," said the Maharajah of Ahanti "You must not think of leaving us Savitri is my heiress, and I regard you as a son All I have will be hers and yours some day, and meantime you will live here and be happy "

"Most noble Sir," the Prince replied, in affectionate and respectful tones, reverently paying homage to his father in law, "your generosity does justice to your kind heart But I, too, have a father He is blind, and I am the only support and comfort of him and my mother in their exile As long as God grants me life, I must prove myself a worthy son "

Maharajah Ashwapati sadly consented But his heart grew sadder still, when Savitri knelt at his feet and asked leave to accompany her husband The Maharajah recognized the greatness of her unselfishness and her love for her

husband, and did not attempt to detain her. He blessed her tenderly, and said :

"Go, my child, I shall not ask you not to follow your husband, but I wish you to choose, and take with you, all you care for which will make your new home comfortable."

The Prince, with clasped hands, once again did reverence at the King's feet, and said :

"Most kind Sir, revered King, forgive me! Now that Savitri is a poor man's wife, what would she do with grand presents? The luxuries of this palace would be out of place in my father's hut, and we live the life of humble hermits."

And Savitri added : "All I want to take with me, beloved father, is your blessing and your affection."

Ashwapati's heart was filled with joy and pride to hear it, and he blessed them, with tearful eyes :

Savitri bade her mother a loving farewell, and, dressed in a *garooah* coloured *sari*, with her luxuriant tresses her only ornament, she walked from the Palace of Ahanti to the *topoban*.

The radiance of her love-lit face caught all eyes, and ministers, courtiers and nobles howed low before her as she passed.

"This is love, pure love," they cried. "She has forsaken all for his sake, and her face and eyes are shining with joy, as with a light from heaven. Born in princely splendour, and surrounded by every luxury, guarded from care, like a pearl of price, yet she goes forth bare-footed, and clad in *garooah*, to live an humble life in a *topoban*."

But Savitri passed on, unconscious of everything, save that he whom she loved, and who was now her life-companion, walked beside her. At the door of the humble hut, the blind King of Ahanti and his wife waited to welcome the newly-wedded pair. Savitri and Satyaban knelt at their feet and asked for a blessing. From the first moment of her arrival, Savitri took her place as the daughter of a poor family, and cooked, as if she had never known the splendour and luxury of a palace.



SAVITRI—But, Savitri passed on, unconscious of everything save that he
she loved and who was now her life companion walked beside her.

Everyone in the *topoban* loved her. She respected the aged hermits and addressed their wives in endearing terms, calling some "aunt" and others "*didai*" (elder sister). Many a silent act of charity was rendered by her to the weary and feeble around her. The children adored her, and she found time, in her busy life, to weave garlands and play games with them. Satyaban worked hard to support the little family, and, when he returned to the meagre hut, Savitri was always ready to welcome him with smiles and words of love.

Thus, some golden months passed by, till the dawn of the fatal day on which Death would claim the fine, young Prince. Savitri had the knowledge in her heart, determined that, if love could conquer the most powerful of all Kings, her love should.

Often, their poverty was so great that the food supplies would be exhausted before more could be procured. On the morning of the dreaded day, Savitri heard her mother-in-law tell Satyaban that they had no fruit,—and nothing left for another meal.

He answered cheerfully: "There is a load of wood to deliver. I shall go into the forest and cut it, and then I shall buy some rice and vegetables."

Savitri stayed her work and, coming towards them, asked "May I go with you, my husband?"

He turned to her, his fine eyes alight with pleasure, and Savitri thought he looked nobler and more loving than ever. She longed to fall at his feet and worship him, and she wished she could fly away with him to some distant world, where Death and his cruel clutches were unknown. And, as the young couple drank from each other's eyes the bliss of love, the exiled Queen answered for her son:

"Oh, no, Savitri, you cannot go! He may perhaps be late coming home."

But Savitri answered: "Mother, we shall get extra wood, and the load will be heavy. I can help him carry it, and then he will get back earlier."

"Why so anxious to come with me?" asked Satyaban lovingly. "The forest is silent and cold, and the way is weary."

"I want to be with you, to help you, to brighten your day," she answered,

She sat quietly, still nursing the beloved body, and caring nothing for the night which was fast closing in. The blackness of the darkening forest soon enveloped her, and the air was rent with the cries of wild beasts seeking their prey. Their keen scent drew them to her and her precious burden, but she did not heed them. And the forest animals understood not the strange stillness of her of the shining eyes, and fled from her.

The night wore on, and the forest lay hushed in silence, grieving with Savitri in her heart-breaking sorrow. The leaves wept tears of dew upon her, and the wind moaned low, in anguish with her. It was a dark night, and, as Savitri sat there and wept, a figure came silently towards her, and she raised her head and saw a gigantic, kingly form. Rays of light emanated from the wondrous jewelled crown upon his head, and she saw that his rich robes were of bright red, here flaming crimson like the tongues of funeral fires, and there deepening into velvet black. He carried a great golden *danda* (stick) in his hand, and behind him came a scribe and many slaves.

Savitri gazed at him, but he stood silent some distant from her. Then she asked, "Who are you, and what do you want of me?"

"*Devi*," (saint) he answered, and his voice seemed to thrill the forest. The wind wailed among the trees. The owls hooted, and other night birds cried uneasily. "*Devi*, I am Yom, Lord of Death, and I come to claim your husband's body, for he is dead."

"Yom, great King of Death," said Savitri, and the forest held its breath, and the night birds ceased their cries, to listen to her answer, "will you not be kind, and give my husband back to me? You surely would not leave me in this dark forest alone, without my husband?"

The dread King answered in a voice of awful majesty. "I must obey the great Law! Else would I grant your request."

But Savitri was not to be denied. "O Great King, he is the only one I live for, and he is all the world to me! Do not take him from me, surely you cannot be so cruel and relentless."

The Lord of Death heeded not her tears. He drew nearer, and said

"Be kind, and allow me to take him. Do not call me cruel, for I am the servant of God, and am here only to obey my Master. You would not have me disobey the great Law."

Then Savitri answered calmly: "No, no, Death, you must obey your Master. Take him, take all that I have in the world." And the forest wondered at her resignation.

But Yom, King of Terrors, could not approach, and he spoke again:

"Devī, you are too good, too pure, for Death to touch. Will you lift your husband's head, and lay it on the ground?"

Savitri lifted the beloved head, and laid it on the hard, cold earth. The wind swept through the trees with a long, wailing note, and the rustling leaves showered heavy tears of dew upon the lifeless form of Satyaban and the bowed head of Savitri. She was calm and quiet.

"Take him, O Death!" she cried. "Take him wherever you wish. Take Savitri's love, Savitri's life, her all."

Now Yom drew near, and his followers came quickly forward and wrapped the young Prince in a winding-sheet, and carried him away. Savitri rose to her feet, and, leaving the dew-weeping forest to mourn her love, silently followed. Presently, Death heard her soft footsteps behind him and, turning round, he discovered that she was coming after him.

"Devī, why do you follow me?" he asked.

"How can I stay here?" she said. "You have taken what is more than life to me. If I were to remain in the world, now, my life would be a living death. I refuse to be a widow. I shall ever follow you."

The Lord of Death was perturbed. He could not take the living to the realms of those who have vanished from earthly life. He thought he must, somehow, persuade her to let him carry away the body of her husband, and he enquired if she had any wish that he could gratify.

"O King!" she answered eagerly, "give back to my father-in-law his long-lost sight."

Yom joyfully promised that her wish would be granted, then turned and

resumed his journey with Satyaban's body. After a while, he again heard footsteps and, turning round once more, found Savitri still following him.

"Why are you still here?" he asked. "I can grant you any wish, except that your husband may be given back to you."

"Oh, King of Death," replied Savitri, "if you are so kind as that, I wish to ask you something more." Death inclined his head to hear. "My father has no heir, let him have a son."

"It is granted," and once more he continued his journey.

But still, Savitri followed. Yom was on the point of going to the next world, when he turned and asked: "*Devi*, why do you still follow me?"

"Oh, Death, kind Death," she answered, "you have given me nothing. You have taken all that I had, and you are leaving nothing for me."

"What do you want for yourself?" Yom asked, troubled by her persistence, for they were nearing the confines of the Land of Shades, and no living foot had ever crossed there. "Ask something for yourself, and I shall give it to you."

"Great King, oh, Death, I would like some sons."

"You shall have them," Yom answered gladly and hurried forward.

But the pattering footsteps still followed, and now they were at the edge of the living world. King Death turned, and in a firm voice addressed her:

"I am surprised at you, *Devi*. I have granted you three wishes, and yet you persist in following me."

"Oh, Great Yom, kind and generous King," she answered reproachfully, "what will people say of me, what will the world say, if I, a widow, have a son? Kind King, think of my religion, think of woman's virtue. Take me, also, then, and put an end to my misery."

Yom opened wide his eyes and looked amazed. He realized, then, what he had granted, and he was conquered. Kneeling there, on the confines of the other world, he paid homage to her, and cried:

"*Devi*, your love for your husband is stronger than Death. You have conquered me. For ever shall the story of your love be told in this world, and your name shall be handed down through the generations and revered, for your

ideal wifely love Take back your husband's body He shall live again and you will never be a widow "

Savitri had no words to thank the King of Death, who for her had held no terror. Yom's followers carried the Prince back to the forest, and laid him down on the soft grass, beneath the old tree where they had found him.

The dawn was breaking in the eastern sky, when Satyahan opened his eyes, and lovingly exclaimed "Savitri, have we been here all night?"

"My lord," she sweetly replied, "you were too tired to go home, so we spent the night here. Are you quite refreshed now?"

"Dear one," he answered tenderly, "I feel quite well again, and must make haste and gather the wood."

He climbed the tree again, and they worked gaily together, and then journeyed home to the little hut in the *topoban*. When they arrived there, Dummatsen, the King of Ahani, met them near the temple. His sight had been miraculously restored, and, when he saw Savitri, he rejoiced to find her as beautiful as she was good.

Soon afterwards, the exiled Maharajah succeeded in recovering his kingdom, and Satyahan and Savitri took their rightful position as Crown Prince and Crown Princess of Ahani.

Last of all, Savitri heard that an heir had been born to her father's house. Thus all were happy, and Savitri's name lives in the land, and Indian ladies revere her memory as the Ideal Wife, whose wonderful love overcame Death and called back her husband from the shaded Land of Departed Souls. Savitri never became a widow, and there is now a vow, called *Savitri vrata*, which Hindu wives often make, and they believe that, if they keep it faithfully, they *will never be widowed*.

SHAIBYA

The Palace of Amaravati (the present Kashmir) gleamed with thousands of tiny lights, cunningly placed among floral wreaths and flags. The scent of *champa*, jasmine and sandal filled the air, and strains of joyful music welcomed every guest. Chandra, the Lord of Night, hung in the sky like a great silver hall, and myriads of stars came hastening to their places, to watch the splendid festival of the *Dev-Raj* (King of Gods) Indra.

In the centre of the great outer courtyard of the Palace, beneath a rich canopy of crimson and gold, sparkling with sunstones, stood the throne of Indra, and, flanking it on each side, were the thrones and seats of the guests, each adorned with the symbols of the occupant's rank. Courtiers, attendants and men-at-arms stood grouped behind, and in front of all was spread an immense dark green carpet, bordered with gold.

When all were assembled, the gates of the Palace were closed and the entertainment began. Sweet music ravished every ear, and, presently, the curtain behind the carpet was raised, and there floated forward forms and faces of rare loveliness. Like flowers swayed by the summer's breeze, the dancers bent, now here, now there, then straightened their slender figures and circled in bewildering grace before the happy guests. Sight and sound seemed blended into one harmonious whole, and the enraptured faces of the vast assembly expressed their pleasure. Never was entertainment like this, and Sachi, Queen of Heaven, turned to her beloved Dev-Indra, with her face flushed with joy, to tell him how proud she was to have such an assembly, which was due to her lord, when there came a wail of discord. *Eraj*, *bina* and *kartal* and many other instruments, seemed to ignore each other, and the ears of the listeners were now pierced with an inharmonious medley, which filled the Court. Then came a terrible crash and silence. The moon and stars were hidden. The countenances

of the guests were now scornful and derisive, while Indra's brow grew black as the rain clouds with which he deluges the earth, and he called aloud, in thundering tones

"Let those who have marred this festival leave Heaven immediately and descend in exile to earth "

All the *devas*, who were playing on their different instruments, stood up in a great rage, threw their instruments away, and said "Curses be on those who have disturbed us at such a pleasant and joyful *darbar* "

One by one the *devas* were leaving, when the trembling figures of five fairy maidens fluttered forward and prostrated themselves at Indra's throne, their faces white as the snow on Kailash peaks. Queen Sachi and her guests gazed at them with pitying eyes, but Indra asked severely

"Are you the cursed ones who spoiled the music of my Court? "

"Majesty of Heaven! they cried in heart-rending tones, "we are. We danced out of time and bewildered the musicians, but oh, great *Bajra Pati*, punish us not so severely. Banish us not to earth, where sickness and sorrow and miseries are known. Punish us here, as thou wilt, loved *Deb Raj*, but oblige us, send us not to earth!"

The King of Gods was touched as he listened to their prayer, and his gentle wife, Sachi, let her hand rest on his an instant, as if she would turn away his wrath, and when he spoke again his voice had lost its thunder

"I am sorry for you, my fairies, very sorry. But I cannot recall my words. Though I am Dev-Indra, Lord of Heaven, I cannot unsay the spoken word "

A wail of anguish came from the kneeling fairies, and a sigh of sympathy sounded through the court. Indra spoke again, and his voice was now gentle as the breezes of *Vasanta* (Spring) which bring hope and promise of fresh life

"Go to earth you must," he said. "But I can mitigate my sentence. If ever there, you meet the Maharajah Harischandra of Kosulla, you will come back to Heaven. For he is a pious man, and his presence will release you from the curse. Now go, descend to earth, straight to the *topoban* of Bishwanmitra. Its scenery is beautiful and will remind you of Amaravati and console you in your exile "

The fairies bowed their heads, in sorrowing resignation, and, prostrating themselves before the throne of Indra, touched his feet, and his Queen's, in mute farewell, and disappeared from the *darbar*.

As they descended to earth, each tried to comfort the other "We shall live in a *topoban*. Mortals say they find Heaven in these forest retreats "

The fairies found the *topoban* empty, for Bishwamitra was away on one of his long absences. This hermitage was at the foot of the Himalayas and the scenery was exquisite, and peace reigned over the mountains and streams. The girls wandered unmolested in the forest, for no fierce animals came within the *topoban*. They bathed in its limpid streams and culled the lovely flowers and made them into ornaments, with which to adorn themselves. They sang to one another the melodies of Indra's court, and the birds, who had always warbled so sweetly in Bishwamitra's garden, hushed their notes to listen. Then, enraptured with the heavenly music, the feathered songsters vowed they would sing no more.

Time passed on, till one afternoon Bishwamitra returned. But what a change met his eye, in his *topoban*. No blossoms, no flowers, no birds' songs. It looked as if there had been some disturbance, what could have happened? He wandered about for some time, till at last he saw the maidens and found that they were the cause of the desolation. Then he cursed aloud, seated in front of his cottage :

"Those who have spoiled my *topoban* are to be prisoners in the forest. May creepers become iron chains, and make them immovable." Uttering these words, Bishwamitra left the *topoban* and went on a pilgrimage.

Suddenly the creepers left the trees to which they clung, and twined themselves around the girls, and pinioned the slender forms like iron bands.

Now Harischandra, King of Kosulla, was the greatest ruler in all the land of Aryavarta, for his kingdom stretched for hundreds of miles east, west and south of the Himalayas.

This Kingdom of Kosulla is one famed in the ancient history of India. It was the country of the *Surya-ransa*, or Solar Race, whose first king was Manu,

the Law-Giver, and comprised the whole region now known as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, and part, if not the whole, of Behar. Its capital Ajodhya, was founded by Ikshaku, the son of Manu, and had attained to great splendour long before the days of Rama. A remnant of this ancient city is still standing on the banks of the Saraju (Gogra river) about three miles from the modern town of Fyzahad. It is yearly visited by thousands of pilgrims, who go to worship at the *Janamsthan*, or Temple of the Nativity of Ram, and to bathe in the sacred waters of the river Saraju, which witnessed Ram's great *Aswamedha*. This famed old capital stretched from the Saraju to the Goomti river. Lucknow was one of its suburbs and was named Luckanpur by Ram, after his devoted brother, Lakshman.

But Harischandra, Lord of Kosulla, did not allow pride of place or power to rule his heart. He was generous, just and kind, and was beloved by all his people. His piety was so great that all the gods loved him and blessed him, so that there was no sickness, nor sorrow nor poverty, in all his dominions.

In his early manhood, Harischandra was married to a princess, named Shaihya, of great virtue and beauty. Framed in the moon-like loveliness of her face were her glorious eyes, like twin lotuses on a single stem, and, when the luxuriant tresses of her black hair were loosened, they made a pool for those sparkling lotus-eyes to hide in. She was straight and slender like a palm, and fair and fragile as a moonbeam and her lips were like honey. And Harischandra whispered low into her ear: "Oh, Shaihya, queen of my soul, well art thou named Taramoti, Pearl among Stars."

He loved her so that he could not leave her side and his ministers and courtiers wondered, and exclaimed in dismay: "How can a king who is so devoted to his wife, ravishes his soul, and he forgets his duties. How can he become a king?"

his kingdom One evening, shortly before the sun set, while she was seated by the lake, she saw the reflection of her husband in the water Glancing up, she saw him, standing behind a tree and looking at her with love and admiration, and Shaihya knew that he neglected his *darbar* work, by doing this She fought against her tender feelings and went up to him and took his hands in hers, and said

"How is it that my lord is here, in the garden, at this time of the day? Is there no *darbar* to-day?"

The husband took her face in her hands and said

"Oh, Shaihya, I can never think of anything but you I want no State, no *darbar* I am happiest when with you!"

"My husband, king of Ajodhya, proud and happy I am now," she replied "but I shall be more so when the people, your subjects, know that you are the best of rulers and do not neglect your duty towards them because of me, my lord I love you, my whole heart and soul are given to you, and, oh, my husband, I pray and hope that you will not make Shaihya, whom you love, miserable by being unkind to your people or neglectful of your duty to the kingdom"

After this, Harischandra was a finer king than before and Kosuli prospered exceedingly, for the gods showered blessings upon the Maharajah and his wife And when Shaihya bore a son, Harischandra thought his cup of joy was filled to overflowing and Shaihya believed that the world did not hold another woman as happy and blessed as herself

One day, when their son, Rohitashya was about four years old, the father was going out hunting and asked his son what he should bring him from the forest The boy answered "Bring me home a little deer"

Harischandra caught the precious child to his heart and promised that he would try to find one, then carried the little lad on his shoulder to the *antapur* and sunned himself a while in the radiance of Shaihya's beauty, and then he tore himself away and started for the chase But his thoughts were of his queen and his son, and soon he left the hunters and rode alone to the *topoban* of

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Shaihya heard from friends and relations that her king and lord had been neglecting his duty towards the State, because of her beauty and love. Though she felt it was hard to tell her husband anything of the rumour, she vowed she would sacrifice her own joy and pleasure and turn her husband to his duty to

his kingdom One evening, shortly before the sun set, while she was seated by the lake, she saw the reflection of her husband in the water Glancing up, she saw him, standing behind a tree and looking at her with love and admiration, and Shaihya knew that he neglected his *darbar* work, by doing this She fought against her tender feelings and went up to him and took his hands in hers, and said

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Bishwamitra in the Kumaon hills, "For there," he thought, "I shall surely find a young fawn for Rohitashya."

As he approached the *topoban*, he heard a wailing sound, and then he distinguished cries of distress. True knight as he was, ever ready to help those in distress, he urged his horse forward and presently the cries grew louder and clearer, and he heard sweet, shrill voices pitifully calling: "Is there no one to save us? Ah, we hunger, we thirst! If any kind heart is near, come, pray come, and help us."

So the Maharajah dismounted, and, tying his horse to a tree, proceeded on foot to the spot whence the cries came. He penetrated through the thick bushes and found five young and pretty girls imprisoned among the forest creepers, the tangles of which, like living bands, held them fast, despite their struggles. Tears streamed down their pale faces, and their cries increased in intensity when they saw the Maharajah.

When he beheld their helpless plight, his chivalrous spirit burned with indignation and, unsheathing his sword, he strode to them and slashed at the creepers till the maidens were free.

"Thank you, thank you, kind Sir," they cried, "May we know who our liberator is?"

"I am Harischandra of Kosulla," he answered, quietly, as he returned his sword to its scabbard.

"Harischandra of Kosulla!" they echoed joyfully. "Now we can get back to Heaven," and they told him their history.

Barely had their tale ended, when a golden *rath* descended from the sky, decorated with celestial flowers called *parijat*. The happy fairies stepped into it and, immediately, the gilded car began to re-ascend, and, as it did so, the grateful maidens threw *parijats* at the amazed Maharajah, calling to him:

"Harischandra, we thank you, we bless you, we shall ever remember you for your kindness to us. Be ever faithful to your religion, in joy or in sorrow."

In the eastern sky, the golden gates of Heaven opened and the *rath* disappeared. Harischandra rubbed his eyes and thought he had been dreaming,

but the *parijat* flowers, and the cut and broken creepers, told him that he had really seen the girls and the *rath*. Puzzled and wondering, he returned home, forgetting all about the fawn for Rohitashya, and when his loved Shaibya asked him what sort of a *shikar* he had had, he answered that he had not seen any, and no more was said about it.

Bishwamitra, after imprisoning the girls, had gone off on one of his wanderings. When he returned, he was curious to see how they had fared, and he hastened to the spot where he had left them. To his surprise, he found the creepers cut and torn asunder, and the maidens gone! Then Bishwamitra was wroth, and, seating himself in concentration, he called up the past scene and beheld Harischandra, the pious Maharajah, release the fairies. What was the use of being a *moonni*, and exercising supernatural powers, if kings and swords were to rush in, in this manner! He determined to avenge himself, and make the Maharajah his own judge. So he hurried to Ajodhya, and entered the *darbar*.

It was about the time of sunset, and the Maharajah had finished all his work, and was on the point of leaving the *darbar* when Bishwamitra entered and walked up to the throne. The King began to welcome the Sage. But Bishwamitra stopped him, calling aloud, in an angry voice: "To-day I come not as a *moonni*, but as a subject, asking for justice."

Harischandra answered, with clasped hands: "For justice, oh, *moonibar*? Who has injured you? But will you not first accept my *arghya* (offering) and afterwards tell me your trouble?"

"No, no," shouted the *moonni*, in a terrible voice, which echoed through the *darbar* like thunder: "No, I shall accept nothing, and know no rest nor peace till I obtain justice from the Ruler."

"Revered Sir, you shall have justice," the King assured him. "Who has wronged you?"

"King of Sasagara! I was happy in my *topoban*. None ever disturbed me there, or interrupted my work. Then there came five intruders, who despoiled and ruined all, and I imprisoned them. And next there came a bold one, who released those five offending damsels and cut my beautiful creepers with his sword."

The Maharajah's face grew colourless, and, when Bishwamitra ceased, he clasped his hands again and said apologetically :

"Sir, great *Moonibar*, I am the culprit, I found the girls in dire distress and I released them, for my religion, the guide of all kings and knights, says 'Rescue those in danger,' and I simply did my duty."

Bishwamitra shook with rage, and asked in angry tones : "Are you not sorry for what you have done?"

"No, Sir, why should I be? I have done what my religion has taught me is my duty as a king and knight."

"Indeed," returned Bishwamitra, "you boast of doing what your religion teaches. Does it teach you to feign ignorance? When I came into your court you asked me who had injured me, and promised justice, and now that you have had to confess yourself the culprit you are pleading duty. One so incapable is not fit to be a ruler."

"Oh, *Moonibar*," cried Harischandra humbly, "I did not become a ruler by choice. I know I am unworthy to fill so great a throne, but what can I do?"

"Make a present of the kingdom to someone who is worthy," the *moonibar* answered tartly.

The ministers and courtiers smiled at his rage, and thought their Maharajah just humoured him, when he answered :

"To whom shall I give it, Sir?"

"Are you really prepared to abdicate your throne?" asked Bishwamitra in deadly earnest, and the court, seeing that the affair had taken a serious turn, listened breathlessly.

"I shall be only too proud to give my State to one who is really able to administer it better than I can," answered the Maharajah.

"Then give it to me!" cried out the *moonibar*. "Before your courtiers, relations, friends and subjects make a present of the kingdom of Kosulla to me."

His powerful voice resounded through the *darbar*, and, for an instant stupefied those gathered there. Then ministers, courtiers and people surged

around the throne, shouting, "No, no " Some prostrated themselves before Harischandra, saying, "You are our king, we want no other."

But the Maharajah heeded them not, and his clear voice rose above the babel, saying earnestly, "Lucky am I, that my State will be in such good hands "

Then, summoning his *gurus* (ministers) he asked for holy Ganges water, and ordered a deed of gift to be drawn up. The court was now dumb with consternation, and the ministers and scribes sorrowfully obeyed the order. When the parchment was ready, Harischandra poured some pure Ganges water in his hand, and, reciting appropriate *mantras*, he handed the deed to Bishwamitra and stepped aside from the throne.

The *mooni* seated himself upon the great golden seat of the Surya-Vansa kings, and then asked :

"Harischandra, where is my *dakshina*? No gift is complete without *dakshina*?"

"How much do you want?" asked the Maharajah.

"One thousand pieces of gold," said Bishwamitra.

Harischandra called to the Treasurer : "Bring one thousand gold pieces from the Treasury."

Bishwamitra laughed loudly : "Ho ! Ho ! Harischandra, you can no longer command the Treasurer. You have made me a gift of the kingdom, and that includes the Treasury and all its gold. All that you can claim here as your own is yourself, your wife and your son. Now, how do you propose to pay me my thousand gold pieces?"

Harischandra stood motionless for a few minutes. Then he raised his head with dignity, and said :

"Forgive me, kind Sir, for my mistake. If you will give me time, I shall pay the *dakshina*."

"Harischandra, now you know you cannot give me the *dakshina*," said the *moon*i, "say that you are sorry for what you did."

"No," said Harischandra, "I did what I thought right, and I shall not speak an untruth."

"How will you get the gold pieces?" asked Bishwamitra.

"I shall beg them," said Harischandra.

"Where will you go?" persisted Bishwamitra. "You have no place of your own."

"I shall go to Benares, which is not an earthly city," said the self-deposed king.

"How long will it take you to get together the thousand gold pieces?" said Bishwamitra.

"Six months," answered Harischandra, "I beg you to allow me that time."

"Now listen," said Bishwamitra, and he leaned forward on the throne, his rough robes and gourd in strong contrast to the regal grandeur of his seat. "I say you did wrong in releasing those girls, and I shall return you your kingdom and absolve you of this debt."

"Moombar, I cannot say that," answered Harischandra, "for I did not release them, and, were I again King, I would do the same."

"Now," said the mooni, "don't let your pride keep you from admitting your fault. Think of all you will suffer. If you will not acknowledge that you did wrong, you and your wife and your son are to quit Kosulla to-morrow morning."

"I shall be ready to go," Harischandra replied firmly, "for I did but my duty in releasing those maidens."

The *darbar* resounded with cries of grief, which were soon hushed by the authoritative voice of the new Maharajah, who informed them he would hold his first council and look into the administration of Kosulla. Harischandra walked away, feeling somewhat sorrowfully of his tired ministers and officers, who, in ordinary circumstances, would have been in their homes, for it was now dark and the temple bells were ringing for the evening offering.

Harischandra directed his steps to the *antapur*. Late as it was, he found the Shai byas still playing with their son. As he entered, Rohitashya ran to his father, and throwing his arms around her, said: "When will father come? I so want to see him!"

Harischandra took in, at a glance, the beauty of the picture, the tender

mother-love of Shaibya's face and the winsome attractiveness of the boy, as he looked coaxingly into his mother's eyes.

Shaibya drew the child on to her knee, saying : "It is late, my sweet son. Look ! the sky is dark, for the sun has gone to bed. You must do the same like a good little son."

The boy laughed roguishly, and asked . "What will you give me, if I am good?"

"My precious one," said his mother, "all that your father and I have, will be yours one day,—everything, and the throne of Kosulla."

The little boy answered reproachfully :

"Mother, do not be unkind. I don't want the throne, for I have often heard father say he would exchange his place with any poor man who sleeps under the trees and is free as a bird. I have often seen father look troubled. He is always thinking of how to make others happy. Why, then, dear mother, do you say you will give me the throne? I do not want to be Maharajah. I just want you and father near me, and I think it would be nice if we could wander away from here and sleep under a tree."

Harischandra, standing behind a marble pillar, watching his two dear ones, wondered how the little boy could have so closely touched upon their future life. Stepping from the shadow, he placed his hand, caressingly, on Shaibya's shoulder, and said : "It is wonderful how well Rohitashya has described our future."

Shaibya did not grasp the meaning of his words but she saw that her husband's face was unusually grave, and, clasping both his hands in hers, she asked, sweetly : "What ails my lord? Beloved, you look ill."

"Shaibya, my loved one," he answered, "I have come to you with a cruel tale, and I want your wifely help."

"What is it?" she cried, the solemnity of his voice, and the sorrow in his eyes, wakening every chord of her heart. "Tell me soon. I live but to love and serve you."

Harischandra told her of all that had taken place in the *darbar*. He rather

feared that his wife would take the news to heart and would be unhappy, for she had, all her life, known wealth and luxury, and he could not hope that she would receive the story of his changed fortunes with equanimity. But, to his surprise, she smiled brightly into his face and, holding his hands in a tighter clasp, said in a loving voice

"My husband, what does it matter? Why should such a trifle trouble you? You did your duty as a king and knight, when you liberated those poor girls. If Bishwamitra *moon* wishes to test you, let him, but he will find he is wrong and you were right, and some day he will come and tell you so. You have done what your religion taught you, my lord, and the blessing of all the *devas* is upon you. Let the world know that Maharajah Harischandra was always guided by his religion "

Harischandra felt that he had never understood his wife's greatness of soul till this his hour of adversity. Lifting Rohitashya into his arms, he drew Shaihya closer to him and, holding wife and son in one strong, loving clasp, he said

"You two, my precious ones, must leave me. I shall have to wander and beg from door to door, till I have collected the thousand gold pieces for the *dakshina*. I shall take you to your father's kingdom."

But Shaihya interrupted him saying :

"My dear husband, I shall not return to my father's home. Where you go I shall follow. I married you, come *duk* (sorrow), come *suk* (joy), and nothing shall part me from you. And where I go, my child goes with me."

Harischandra begged her to go back to her father, and tried to describe what the life of poverty and hardship would be like, but Shaihya silenced every argument with a caress, exclaiming : "My king, you are now more mine than you have ever been. There is now no kingdom to come between us, and I shall be all and everything to you. Oh, it is a joyful prospect, and I shall have an opportunity of proving my devotion to you "

Harischandra looked at the beautiful face of his wife, and thought he had never seen her more entrancing. Love irradiated her every feature, and her

lips seemed to him a flower from which he could draw his soul's refreshment. He strained her closer to his heart, murmuring :

"Have I lost Kosulla to find my all in life in Shaibya! Oh, my wife, pearl-star of happiness, it shall be as you wish. We shall go forth together, and nothing shall separate us."

When the Maharajah changed his rich robes for a *garooah*-coloured *dhoti* of coarse texture, Shaibya felt a sharp pang go through her heart, but she hid her hurt and, following his example, dressed herself and their son like hermits. So delicate was her sense of honour, that she would not take with her personal jewels, the gifts of her parents. She left all to the State, only placing some cheap bangles upon her wrists, that none might think her a widow.

At dawn, they left the Palace and set out for Benares. The people of Kosulla followed them along the streets, weeping bitterly, till the great gates of the city were reached. Then Harischandra forbade them to come any further, and the little party went on alone.

For days, they travelled on, through the towns, villages and golden wheat-fields of the kingdom of Kosulla, begging from door to door and sleeping under trees at night. Shaibya noticed the loved faces of husband and son growing sharp and weary, and she bravely hid her own fatigue and enlivened the night march with stories and snatches of song.

At last, they reached Benares, and found shelter in a little hut, not far from the temple of Bishweswar, on the Ganges. (The temple was razed to the ground by the Emperor Aurangzeb, and a mosque built on its site). Here they lived, subsisting on *bhog* (sacred food) from Bishweswar and Annapurna temples. Harischandra begged persistently but did not succeed in collecting any money, and each day was bringing him nearer to the time when the six months of grace would be ended.

On the eve of the dreaded day, he was restless, and thought he would go out into the cool air and refresh his fevered body. He opened the door and stepped over the threshold. As he was fastening the latch, he saw a big black figure standing up against the cottage.

"Who are you" asked Harischandra.

"Do you not know me?" asked a harsh, metallic voice. "My name is Debt, and, in all the living world, there is none more powerful than I. Kings, princes and nobles fear me when they fall under my sway. Crimes are often committed to propitiate me."

Harischandra shivered with fear. He rushed back into the hut and, closing the door securely, fell upon his knees and prayed to be released from this awful bondage. Sleep did not touch his eyes, and, when day broke, he begged Shaibya to go to the Temple of Bishweswar and pray that he would succeed in getting the money that day.

Shaibya smiled sweetly at him and said, cheerfully

"Beloved, do not be so depressed. This trial is but to test you, to prove your integrity, and, if you have faith, God will bring you through it victorious. I shall go and pray that he will give you strength and help."

She spent a long time at Bishweswar's shrine and, when she returned, she told Harischandra that she felt sure all would come right, in spite of the present blackness. Shaibya had brought some *bhog* from the temple and, after they had refreshed themselves with it, they wandered out, accompanied by Rohitashya, and begged from house to house, but all in vain.

Evening was closing in, and the sun hung low in the western sky and tinged the holy waters of the Ganges with his crimson rays. Piles of rosy and golden clouds had gathered, to say good-night to the sun, and birds were winging their way across the river to their favourite resting-places. All Nature seemed putting aside the turmoil and strife of day, as Harischandra, and his wife and child turned their steps homewards. Shaibya was endeavouring to drive away her husband's despondency with hopes of better luck tomorrow, when a harsh voice smote their ears, and, turning, they beheld Bishwamitra.

"The six months will this day be over. Where are my thousand gold pieces?" he asked. His *kamandalu* (begging-bowl) was in his hand, and a triumphant expression gave a malignant look to his eyes. He surveyed the

forlorn and emaciated trio before him, and repeated "Where is my money?"

"I have not succeeded in getting it, kind Sir," answered Harischandra

"Well," replied Bishwamitra, "I don't want the money Just own that you were in the wrong about those prisoners of mine, and I shall forgive your debt "

"No, revered Sir," answered Harischandra, his voice ringing firm and strong as of old, and Shaibya's heart rejoiced at his invincibility "I cannot say that I simply did my Raj duty, and I shall never regret that I did

"Then give me my money, give me my money," demanded the moon

Harischandra stood before him, but made no answer

"Proud and haughty man," shouted Bishwamitra, "your pride must be trampled upon, and the world will know that you were in the wrong But there is time, even now Say that you were wrong, and I shall pardon you See the fading sunset With its last rays, will disappear the honoured name of your ancient family—— "

"Kind moon," interrupted Harischandra, "spare my ancestors Leave the ancient name of my house But take my life in place of the *dahshina* Here, I offer to you my heart! Stab it, and let my blood efface my debt "

"Why should I take your life, when I want my money?" sneered the moon You pride yourself on your integrity as a Kshattriya, and this is how you keep your word Ho! Ho!" and his mocking laugh echoed in the street

"Kind moon," and Shaibya fell at his feet, "take my life, and spare the ancient name of the Kosulla Raj "

The moon looked at her and a fresh thought crossed his mind

"My child," he said to her, in suave tones, "if you are so anxious to help your husband, why don't you go and sell yourself as a slave to some rich lady "

The words had barely left his lips, when Shaibya sprang to her feet

"Oh, kind moon," was her thought "like a friend, you have pointed out to me the true path of wifely devotion " Aloud she said "Husband, I shall sell myself, and bring you the gold "

"No, never!" exclaimed Harischandra, in an anguished voice, and all his inunhood rebelled against the degrading proposition All his chivalry

swelled up, within him, at the thought of such debasement for his gentle wife

"Never mind the anger of this *moon*. Let the name of Ikshaku and his race be forgotten in this world, but let it not be said that a Kshattriya was a coward and sold his wife to slavery to save himself. *Moonbar*, curse me, kill me, besmirch my family name, punish me as thou wilt, but do not make my wife suffer, to free me from thy cruel bond "

Harischandra was very angry, but Shaibya watched her opportunity, and fled while he gazed, with grief, at their son. She ran swiftly to the richer quarters of the town, and began to ask from house to house if a woman slave were needed. She had not gone far, when she heard of a rich merchant who wanted a slave for his wife. Obtaining admission to his presence, she told him she could procure one for him.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"Here!" replied Shaibya, "I wish to sell myself."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the merchant, "you look like one who is waited upon by slaves! I want a strong wench, who can work."

"I can work. Try me, Sir," begged Shaibya.

"Don't talk nonsense. You look too fragile." Then he said reflectively "It is difficult to get slaves, nowadays. Since Harischandra came to the throne, the country has been so prosperous that there is no poverty, and, consequently no slaves to be had."

Shaibya's face lighted up with pleasure at hearing her beloved husband praised. Then she said "Kind Sir, if you will purchase me, you will never regret it. I shall work hard, and be ever faithful to you."

The sincerity in her voice caused the merchant to look more closely at her, and he was struck by the refined purity and goodness of her face.

His voice changed, and he asked curiously "Who are you, young woman, and why are you so anxious to sell yourself as a slave?"

"Sir," she answered, and the earnestness of her voice assured him that she spoke the truth, "my poor husband is in debt, and I wish to sell myself in order to free him."

The merchant thought for a moment Then he asked "Well, what is the price you want for yourself?"

"One thousand gold pieces," she answered eagerly

But the merchant was a miser, and he liked to get everything as cheaply as he could. So he rejoined. "Impossible!" and his manner was so rough that Shaihya was afraid of losing the chance of selling herself, and, thinking half the sum would be better than nothing, she said "Then five hundred, kind Sir, give me five hundred."

In spite of himself, the merchant felt sorry for her, and not only agreed to the sum but gave her the gold pieces, which she hastily carried to the mooni, and, placing them at his feet, she cried :

"Here are five hundred gold pieces. That is all I am worth. Oh, Moonibar, be kind, and wait for the other five hundred."

Harischandra exclaimed, in tones broken with grief "Oh, Shaihya, have you sold yourself, to pay my debt? Oh, why did you? How could you? Hundreds of maids waited upon you once, and now you are going to be a slave yourself and serve others. What a terrible day it was when you took me for a husband, a coward, to save whom, you went and sold yourself."

Then, with clasped hands, he looked up to the sky, and prayed aloud, in a voice of such terrible frenzy that Rohitashya was terrified and clung to Shaihya : "God of Heaven, hear me ! my wife is a bond slave ! Indra Dev, hurl down one of your thunders, and annihilate me from this Earth. Yom, Lord of Death, bear me hence ! None welcome your coming, but I shall embrace you with open arms. Come, kind King, and free me from this burden of mortality."

The merchant, who had followed Shaihya, began to feel alarmed that he might lose his bargain as well as his money, and he called impatiently

"My newly-bought slave, it is getting late, come away."

Harischandra dashed his hands down and shouted "Slave ! my wife, a slave !"

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"My newly-bought slave, it is getting late, come away "

Harischandra dashed his hands down and shouted "Slave! my wife, a slave!"

But Shaihya caught his clenched and threatening hands in hers. and said beseechingly :

"My husband and lord, do not forget who you are ! Half the debt is now paid and you will, I am sure, get the remainder of the money. You will have Rohitashya with you and will be happy. And when fair days come back, perhaps you may forget me and have other wives, hut you will ever be my only *deb*, for you have counted Truth above all things and I am proud of you."

Again the merchant called, impatiently, and Shaibya, touching Harischandra's feet, said "Good bye, my husband," and, embracing Rohitashya, covered him with farewell kisses.

Harischandra seemed like one bereft of his senses. He snatched Shaibya into his arms, and, hiding his face on her shoulder, wept aloud, saying :

"Oh, my loved wife, my beautiful one, how can I let you go? All these hard months you have been so good, so brave ! I never missed the luxuries of the Palace, for you were nil in life to me. Don't leave me now, my Shaihya, my heart will break. My soul cannot bear this loss."

The merchant, in a very loud and angry voice, reminded Shaihya that he waited for her. Gently releasing herself from the distraught Harischandra, she drew her arms away from her child and, once again touching her husband's feet, turned to leave them.

But Rohitashya clung to her, crying : "Take me with you, mother." And Harischandra cried, in awful grief : "Yes, take him Shaibya, and forgive and forget your unfortunate husband, who is not worthy of you." And then, like a madman, he called out : "Shaibya, Shaibya, where are you going?"

Shaihya looked at him gently and said : "Beloved, my husband, you have been guided by your religion, and will be guided by it all your life. God will give you strength," and, lifting the weeping child into her arms, she signed to the merchant that she would follow him. But his mean spirit was roused, and he asked angrily : "Do you expect me to feed and clothe the boy, as well as you?"

"No," answered Shaibya, "he can share my food with me."

They soon reached the merchant's house and Shaibya found that she was the only servant. The house was a large one, and the merchant's wife a vain and worldly woman, with no thought beyond herself and her jewels and clothes. She had never, in her life, seen anyone as beautiful and refined as Shaibya, and her narrow spirit soon flamed with jealousy. She ridiculed her husband for buying such a white-faced, helpless-looking slave. Shaibya tried to appease her, by calling her 'mother', and gently assuring her that she could and would work. Soon, the merchant's house began to look transformed, for Shaibya worked as no other slave had ever done, and all the neighbours wondered. But the merchant and his wife had no further pity for her, and the meagre dole of food vouchsafed her had to do for her and her child.

Shaihya's one happiness was Rohitashya, and, whenever the merchant's wife ill-treated him, she kissed away his tears and comforted him with assurances that, when his father came back, he would never let him cry. The merchant's wife, carried away by her jealousy of Shaihya's beauty, said, she would not allow Rohitashya to remain in the house unless he worked, so he helped his mother, and one of his duties was to gather flowers for the *pūja* room.

When Shaihya walked away, following the merchant, and carrying her child in her arms, Harischandra stood as silent as a stone, watching them disappear up the street. The moon woke him from his apathy, by asking harshly :

"Do you see the sun? It will soon disappear, and with it your dynasty and name."

Harischandra broke away from him, shouting aloud : "Will any kind soul save me, or buy me?"

He rushed on, thus shouting, till he came to the fields of *shmathan* (burning place). The undertaker needed a man, to help him burn the dead. When he heard Harischandra shouting, he looked at him, and said :

"You appear to be either a Brahmin or Kshattriya. You will not do *chandal's* work, will you?"

Now, a *chandal* is considered to be of the lowest caste, because his duty is

to burn the dead, and, in India, all dead bodies are considered impure

Harischandra answered "I am in great trouble, and one to whom I owe money is following me. If you can help me, I shall be ever grateful to you."

"How much do you want?" asked the *chandal*.

"Five hundred gold pieces, and I promise I shall be a faithful servant to you, and carry out all your wishes."

The *chandal* produced five hundred gold pieces, and, when the moon arrived, in pursuit of Harischandra, he found him embracing the *chandal* as if he were his brother, and heard him say "You may be a *chandal* in caste, but you have the heart of a Brahmin."

However, Bishwamitra refused to touch the money, because it had been handled by a *chandal*. The *chandal* was indignant, and said

"What kind of moon are you? And where is your righteousness? You were going to destroy this man, and his ancient name, for a paltry five hundred gold pieces, and now you talk of caste! When you come to this burning-ghat, a corpse, who will touch you? Who will do the last, on earth, for you? I,—I, a *chandal*! Remember this. All must die, Brahmin and Kshattriya, moon, priest and slave, and all must pass to eternity through *chandal* hands."

The unpleasant truth thrilled the moon, and he hastily departed, but, to the *chandal's* great amusement, he did not leave the gold behind him.

Harischandra remained in the *shmathan*, helping the *chandal* to burn the dead. Often, at night, he stood at the *ghat*, near the fast-flowing river, and, looking at the silent sky, wondered where Shaibya and their son were, and what was their lot.

One morning, Rohitashya took the *shaji* (flower basket) and went into the garden, to gather flowers as usual, but did not return. When the merchant came to do his *pūja*, he wanted the flowers and called for Rohitashya, who was found lying dead, in the garden.

The young wife screamed "Turn out that slave. She has brought us bad luck, and, if we look upon Shaibya's face now, evil will come upon us."

The miserly merchant, fearing he might have to defray the expenses of



THE END OF THE WORLD

the boy's cremation, took her advice, and ordered Shaihya to leave the house instantly, and take her son's corpse with her.

Shaihya, distracted with grief, wept over Rohitashya's body, saying "Oh, my precious boy, my only happiness, light of my life, why have you gone? Oh, my child, come back! Rohitashya, awake, speak to me!"

The hours passed, while she exhausted her grief, and it was evening before she thought of the cremation. Lifting the loved body from off the ground, she covered the face with her *achal*, and set out for the *shmashan*. The clouds gathered, as she walked the solitary streets, neither moon nor star was visible, and she seemed to be going through a city of darkness.

Weeping and wailing, she reached the burning-ghat. In this city of the dead, the sight was one of horror. Shaihya, once the Maharani of Ajodhya, walked among the burning pyres, and chased away jackals, with her dead child on her breast. She clasped him tightly, and called out, in a heart-rending voice:

"If there is any kind-hearted person in this *shmashan*, come to me, and help me!"

Close by the river, there stood a big tree. Under it, with a thick stick in his hand, was a *chondal*, whose heart beat fast, as he said to himself: "A woman's cry! In this *shmashan*, a woman is crying out for kindness! She must be mad with grief, to ask for help, on the burning-ground of the dead."

Again, the cry came. "Is there any kind heart who would help me?"

The *chondal* put his hand to his breast and said: "Many a dead body I have burnt in this *shmashan*. Why does my heart beat, at the cry of this woman?"

He walked to the place whence the cry came. By the lightning's flash, he saw a woman, with a dead child in her arms.

He asked: "Woman, what do you want here? Whom are you calling?"

In an agonized tone, she answered: "I have come to give all I had in this world. Will you help me?"

"What is it? Is your son dead? How is it that you have come alone? Have you no husband, no friend?"

She said "Oh, I had all, once, but they are gone, and now the only joy I had, this son of mine, has left me Will you be kind and help me?"

"You want me to burn his body," said the *chandal* "Give me the money, and I shall buy the necessary wood "

"But I have no money," she replied

"Then you can't have your child's body burnt "

"Oh, kind man, can you not give me the wood, without the money?" she begged

"A few cowries will buy a bundle of wood," he said

"I have not got even that, " she said in distress

"Woman, then I cannot do anything for you I am a servant, and must do my duty to my master," and as she wept, he added, "Why did you not bring some one with you, to help you?"

"Sir, the child was alone with me, a sacred trust What shall I tell his father, when he returns!"

By this time the storm had burst, and a vivid flash of lightning lit up everything like day, and Harischandra, for it was he, saw the glitter of gold on Shaihya's neck

He said "You say you have no money, and that you loved your child, yet you have a gold ornament on your neck Give it to me, and I shall procure wood to cremate the body "

At his words, Shaihya placed the lifeless form of her son upon the ground, and, clasping her hands together, wept bitterly, for the jewel he had noticed and asked for was her *mangal sutra* (wedding amulet) which no Hindu wife removes from her neck, till she is widowed The mere suggestion plunged her into a frenzy of grief, and she cried aloud, in piercing accents

"Harischandra, my husband, where, oh, where are you? Am I a widow? Beloved, if you live, come and tell me I am still your wife! This *chandal* is so cruel as to wish me to take the *mangal sutra* off my neck Harischandra, where are you to-night? I have lost my only child, and have I lost you also?"

Harischandra was now sure of her identity, for his request for the amulet had merely been to test her. He cried out "Shaihya, is it you?" and caught her in his arms, and strained her to his heart.

Resting his head against hers, he mingled his tears with hers, murmuring sadly "My beautiful Shaihya, my lost pearl star! do we meet thus, in a *shmathan* over the body of our precious son, the heir of Kosulla, the light of the *Surya vansa*? We shall never more part. Come, let us take the body of Rohitashya with us, and end our lives in holy Mother Ganges."

Overwhelmed with sorrow, they clung to each other. Shaihya, worn with battling against adversity, the shock of her son's death and the sudden meeting with her husband, broke down completely, and lay swooning in his arms. Harischandra wept over her, lavished his long pent up love upon her and warmed her back to life with his caresses. She gazed into his sad eyes, with her grief sunken ones, and murmured "Harischandra, our son, our son!"

"Beloved," he answered, and the leaden despair in his voice struck the last knell of sorrow on her heart, "with Rohitashya has gone the hope of our lives. With him, the race of Ikshaku is ended. My family name has ceased. Nothing remains for us to live for. Then, as I have said, let us seek death and forgetfulness in the sacred Ganges."

He gently put Shaihya away from him, and lifted the silent form of Rohitashya into his arms, to bear him to the river. The boy's eyes were half open and his lips slightly parted, showing the pearly teeth. The black curls clustered, in silken rings, upon his forehead, and, as Harischandra raised the body of his son from the ground, the pangs of fatherly love and anguish overcame him, and he addressed the still form, in passionate entreaty

"Rohitashya, my boy, open your eyes, and speak! My son, my treasure, your father is here. Speak, oh, speak!"

Together, the despairing husband and wife mourned their son, and began to stumble rather than walk towards the river. Unheeded by them, the storm had swept over them, and the pale stars of dawn were now showing in the azure sky. But, for them, hope was ended, and their one desire, now, was to find

peace in death But a form approached them, and they recognized him as Bishwamitra Moon

"Why do you come to me again, *Moonbar*?" asked Harischandra
 "I owe you nothing now "

The *moons* stood in their path, and replied, in a very calm and soft voice

"Harischandra, I come to ask you, for the last time, if you will not admit that you were wrong in releasing my prisoners If you will only say you are sorry for that action, I shall restore to you your kingdom, and all that you have lost "

The long suffering Maharajah raised his head, and his whole attitude changed The despondency of grief was gone the dejection of his hearing vanished Kingly indignation and scorn lent height and majesty to his attenuated frame His eyes blazed, like living fires, and he answered, in a voice of invincible determination

"*Moonbar*, I did my duty as a king, and would do it again, were the chance to come again You cannot tempt me to deny what our holy religion teaches You wish to return my kingdom to me now For what? for whom? See!" and he held out the body of Rohitashya, "the *dip* (light) of Kosulla is gone The name of *Surya-vansa* has ceased to be, in this world Everything is lost to me, but Truth I came into this life empty-handed, I go from it the same, but Truth, divine and righteous Truth, has ever been mine, and shall be mine No power of yours can wrest it from me, and I spurn your offer and invite you to follow me to the edge of Mother Ganges, and there witness the end of the last of the Royal Sons of the Sun "

His voice sounded like a clarion, and Shaibyā held herself proudly What mattered all the past suffering and sorrow? Was it not bliss to be mated to a soul like his? Could death hurt? No, it would be but the crossing to another and higher life! Together, he and she would float forth from mortality to immortality Already, the golden gates of the blest were opening before her tired eyes, and she waited for the liquid notes of heavenly music But earth still claimed her and him The Royal Children of the Sun had yet work to do in the living world, and the *moon's* voice broke her reverie

He now spoke in tones of ineffable peace, and his words seemed, at first, another dream

"Rohitashya but sleeps in a trance caused by a snake-bite Give him to me, I shall restore him "

Dazed and wondering, believing and yet doubting, Harischandra allowed the Sage to take the child's body from his arms The *moon* seated himself, and, placing the boy upon the ground, bathed a tiny, punctured wound, upon the right thigh, with water from his *kamandaku* and then applied some healing balm After a few minutes, Rohitashya opened his eyes, and saw his father A flash of joy illumined his face, and, jumping up, he threw himself into Harischandra's outstretched arms Shubhya's enraptured cry, at his restoration, reminded husband and child that she was there, and Harischandra found room for her in his arms As they stood locked in each other's embraces, with tears of joy where furrows of anguish had been, the sun rose in golden splendour and bathed them with his morning radiance

"Harischandra, victory is yours," said the *moon*, and admiration filled his voice "I have lived on this earth for many years and have never paid homage to anyone, but to-day I honour you and stand before you conquered, and you are the one who has conquered me Your righteousness shall live for ever In heaven your throne is now being made ready All these trials have been but to test your virtue Now return to Kosulla, and live happily there Your son and your son's son shall sit on the throne of Manu for many generations to come "

The Maharajah, the Maharani and their son fell at Bishwamitra's feet

"*Moonbar*," said Harischandra, "I can never thank you enough For me these trials have been but a mirror in which I beheld my Shubhya's unselfish love It is the crown and jewel of my life "

Soon all Kasi (Benares) rang with the wonderful news The *chandal* of the burning ghat came and knelt at Harischandra's feet, and said

"Forgive me, Sire, for hiring a Kshattriya King as my assistant "

But the Maharajah would not permit him to say any more Bending

forward, he raised the lowly *chandal*, and answered

"My true friend, your kind help saved me, and I shall never forget your kindness. Warriors and kings know no caste. For them the sun shines but to manifest to the world the truth and chivalry which must shine from pole to pole before perfect peace and brotherhood come to reign for ever on earth. *Chandal* though you be, and despised by others, your name shall live for ever and be remembered by every king, while this world lasts."

The merchant and his wife prostrated themselves at Shaibya's feet, craving forgiveness for all their harshness. The happy Maharani thanked them, with tears, for purchasing her, and thus helping her to help her beloved husband. And Harischandra thanked and rewarded them for being the instruments through which he found his wife and child. Bishwamitra accompanied them to Ajodhya, and ever, as they journeyed thither, the concourse gathered, and, when the gates of the Palace were reached, all the people of Kosulla surged in joyous masses around their King and Queen.

Harischandra held a great *darbar*, and the *chanda*¹ was the most honoured guest.

To this day, in Benares, is the *shmathan* where the Maharajah worked as a *chandal*, and it is known to the present generation as Harischandra *Ghat*, and, near by, stands a house where the famous *chandal* lived.

On the same terrace in the Palace where Harischandra had joined Shaibya and Rohitashya, the night before they left the Palace on their wanderings, the three were again seated under the full moon. Harischandra had Rohitashya on his knee, and, on his left, was Shaibya. He said to her, in a proud and loving tone:

"Shaibya, if I had not been sent on that exile, and Bishwamitra had not been the means of trying our lives, the world would never have known the love you possessed for your husband. You sold your life, to help me in the path of right, which no other wife ever did. As long as the world lasts, your love for me will live, and your name will shine like the star of *sattva* (virtuous love)."

SITA

I

Some thousands of years ago in the north of India, there was a kingdom called Videha. A pious man reigned there, named Janaka *Rishi*. His piety and goodness won for him the name of *Rishi*. He was a venerable man, and although a Maharajah, he led the life of a farmer.

One spring morning this King-farmer was out in the fields ploughing as usual, and the sun was shining in all its glory on the ripe yellow corn in the surrounding fields, giving it a rich golden appearance. The saintly looking king was driving a team of four grey oxen, and making as he drove, straight long *sitas* (furrows) in the ground. Suddenly his attention was drawn to what he thought was a stone in the way of his plough, it was something hard and solid. The oxen were stopped and the King *Rishi* stooped down to see what it was, when to his great surprise he discovered a gold *gharrah* (pitcher) buried in the ground. The King picked up the *gharrah* and to his utter astonishment he found it contained a beautiful little baby, a little girl! The King was spell bound for a moment. Was this some delusion? Was it a dream? or was it really true? The King was overwhelmed with happiness and said to himself: "I am no longer childless, this baby shall be my daughter and shall bear the name of my ancestors." King *Rishi* hastened to the Palace to show the precious baby to the Queen. The Maharani's heart, was filled with unspeakable happiness and joy when she saw the lovely baby, and there was great rejoicing in the State when the news became known that the Queen had a daughter. The little girl was called Sita as she was found in the furrows (*sitas*).

II

The great King of *Rakshasas* who inhabited the southern part of India, was

Ravan, Ruler of Lanka (Ceylon) This King was a rich and powerful man His country contained vast mines of gold and precious stones He had many sons and they were all brave, valiant men, and added strength and power to his name

In those olden days, it was customary for assemblages to be held in the forests by *yogis* and *rishis* These were revered men who had great freedom and travelled all over India, holding conclaves wherever they chose

On one occasion when a meeting was in progress, these holy men were disturbed by an order from King Ravan who sent his messenger to disperse them and send them out of his territory, unless they paid him a tribute "We are beggars and hermits," the holy men replied, "and have neither money nor possessions How can we pay tribute? Ask the King to kindly excuse us " The messenger went backwards and forwards several times, but, King Ravan was obdurate and nothing would persuade him to change his mind so, the *moonis* had to comply with his demand The *moonis* then selected a *gharrah* and each of the holy men put a drop of blood, taken from his forehead, into it and handed it over to the messenger, saying "Take this as a tribute to your Lord This *gharrah* is most valuable, for it carries a crushing significance which will end his royal splendour ' When the messenger arrived with the *gharrah* and the message, the King was so alarmed at the words and told his messenger to carry the *gharrah* to India and bury it in some deserted place The hermits in the meanwhile disappeared

North into Videha the messenger journeyed, and buried the portentous gold pitcher in an appropriate land This was the *gharrah* in which Sita, daughter of the earth, was found Janaka and his Maharani and all his subjects of Videha welcomed the furrow born baby as their *Rajkumari*

Great was the joy of the kingdom, when, just a year after Sita was found in the furrows, King Janaka's wife gave birth to a daughter, who was named Urmila At the same time, the wife of Prince Kushadhwaja, the brother of Janaka, bore him twin daughters, their names being Mandavi and Srutakirti They were all very pretty children, but Sita was by far the most beautiful, a

Goddess of Beauty Sita was in ignorance of her birth and of her parentage Janaka and the Queen were indeed her father and mother in thought, wish, and desire They looked upon her as their golden ray, their good fortune She was regarded by all as the Princess Royal of Videha

The four Princesses bore deep affection for each other The King was most happy to have such loving daughters around him

The years passed away happily Sita arrived at the age of fourteen Many suitors pleaded for her hand, the Maharajah knew not whom to accept, and in his perplexity, thought of a test An enormous bow had been left in his keeping by a great Brahmin Parashurama, who had told King Janaka that the weapon was very ancient and could be wielded only by one with divine attributes The bow was Siva's, and when Parashurama left it he said "when I return I shall break the bow and marry Sita But if I am late in returning, you should marry your daughter to the man who can break the bow "

Accordingly as Parashurama did not return, and Sita was in her maiden hood, the saint king sent out invitations all over India, north, south, east and west for a great *Swayambara* with the news that whoever broke the bow would marry Janaka's daughter Sita The King also invited all the holy men *rishis* and *moonis* to be present Among those invited was Bishwamitra, a renowned sage of the court of Ajodhya, and preceptor to the sons of Dasaratha, the Sun King of Kosala

III

Dasaratha Maharajah was a warrior of fame and great riches He had brought all the tribes of the Solar Races under his imperial sway His dynasty had been found by Raghu the Great, the Sun Prince whose successors had ever striven to preserve the honour of the name which all were proud to bear Dasaratha was the noblest of his line and headed the chiefs and devotees in the clans of the *Surya-ansa*, as the saintly Janaka did in the Moon Race The ruler of the Kosalas was such another as *Rajarsi* of Videha, having arrived at an old age before he knew the joy of children on his knees

King Dasaratha had three wives,—the first was the Queen Kausalya, a stately and religious woman, daughter of Kosala, was respected and loved by King Dasaratha. The next was a Persian Princess, and his favourite, by name Keykaya, a woman of great beauty and courage. On two occasions she saved the life of her husband and king. This together with her charms, had endeared her above the others to the King. The youngest wife was Sumitra, daughter of the Maharajah of Magadha.

After years of patient waiting and many *pujas* and *yagnas*, these queens pleased their aged husband by the birth of four sons. The eldest queen Kausalya's son was named Ramchandra and he was the first born, Keykaya's son was Bharata, and Sumitra's twin sons were Lakshmana and Satrugna. The birth of these four sons meant much in the land of Kosala. The hearts of the people rejoiced, and the land was full of delight and promise.

The beautiful palace house of the Sun-King stood on the banks of the river Saraju. Here these Princes lived and grew to manhood in such love and devotion to one another, that it would appear as if one soul had been diffused in four bodies. The twins attached themselves in a wonderful manner to their half brothers. Lakshmana was the inseparable companion of Ramchandra, and Satrugna of Bharata. The king loved his sons with an intensity born of the long years of waiting and Rama was his favourite. His exemplary conduct and prompt obedience to the wishes of his father, became almost a proverb in the Kingdom. In him were centred all the king's hopes and the people of Ajodhya built theirs on him as well.

The care and education of the *Rajkumars* was confided to the Venerable Basista Deh, a pious man and very learned, with such accomplishments as would grace a Prince. Under his guidance these royal youths developed into clever, brave and courteous young men.

IV

When Prince Rama was about sixteen years of age, a band of *Rukshasas* from the south, approached Kosala, devastating the forests of the many groups

of hermits residing in them Basista Deh considered this a good opportunity for Rama to show his bravery, and the hoy, eager to earn a reputation, and win his spurs, unhesitatingly accepted the idea King Dasaratha, his father, was very reluctant to accept such a suggestion, but the persuasions of the *rishi* made the King consent The brothers Rama and Lakshmana accompanied Basista Deb When they arrived at the *topoban* of Bishwamitra Moomi, Ramchandra heard all about the giantess Taraka and killed her the next time she visited the *topoban*

When Ramchandra was leaving, Bishwamitra said "You have killed the giantess but she has two sons, Marich and Subahu and they will come and disturb me in my *pujas*, so you will have to destroy them also" Ramchandra and Lakshmana with Basista Deh waited there, and when Marich and his brother attacked the *topoban* of Bishwamitra, Ramchandra with his great skill sent such arrows that Marich ran away and his brother was killed After this Basista Deh told Bishwamitra to take the boys home They all paid homage to Basista Deb and Ramchandra and Lakshmana started for Kosala with Bishwamitra

The young Princes were returning in all their glory, when on their journey Bishwamitra spoke of the great wedding to be held by the Maharajah of Videha, and said he would like to attend it in company with them The Princes readily consented, and they followed him to Mithila

V

They arrived on the morning of the wedding day The capital of the Chandravansa Chakravati was a city of peace and nature smiled there all the year round It looked grand, hung with flags on every tower and turret and was gay for the approaching occasion Drums beat and bells rung to welcome the crowds, as they entered It was a brilliant sight, Kings and Princes on splendid horses and fine elephants, nobles in decorated and sumptuous *raths* Amongst them came the little party with Bishwamitra Though the two Princes were dressed in simple clothes their appearance attracted one and all Ram

chandra and Lakshmana were deeply interested in all they saw, for this was their first visit to another kingdom besides their father's. The two Princes walked on with their sage friend into the garden where stood the royal temple of Mithila, with the family God. In passing through the garden from another gateway four maidens approached. They were attired in red silk rument and each carried a *thala* (plate) containing paste sandal wood, flowers and other offerings of worship, which made sweet-scented aroma. They all drew near the temple steps together. Prince Rama's dark eyes met the soft eyes of the tallest girl, in that encounter two hearts beat quickly in one accord, the sealed casket of love had been opened. Silently but assuredly, Sita gave all to Rama and he gave all to Sita. The unknown fair maiden filled Rama's heart and he whispered, "You are the queen of my heart" and Sita's silent thoughts to the stranger said, "Take all I have for you are the one I love."

The maiden disappeared into the shadowy interior of the sacred building, with an unusually bright colour on her lovely face. Each wondered who the other was. In the evening the *darbar* was held in Janaka's spacious hall of audience, where the crystal floors reflected the forms of the guests as they were ceremoniously ushered to their seats. There was a gold throne in the centre of a dais by which King Janaka stood, surrounded by the jewelled thrones of the various kings and princes.

The *Durbar Hall* contained a gallery for ladies and there the lovely Sita stood with her sisters. She was dressed in rich bridal attire, and there lay the garland on a golden tray, which would be thrown by Sita round the neck of the hero of the *swayanibara*. In the clear space before the throne, Janaka stood watching his guests, most anxiously waiting to discover the great hero. As each competitor advanced to the "*Haru Dhanoo*" (Bow), his hand sang his titles and praises. Hour after hour passed—Kings, Princes and nobles of the Sun and Moon and other races had exerted their utmost skill. They could not even move the bow, from where it lay, much less bend it. Disappointment and anger were visible on the faces of hundreds of the Knights.

Then Rama approached the bow, and stood before it, while a herald's

sonorous voice called aloud his name and title. As he stood there, the centre of attraction, Sita, who was in the gallery, recognised him as he stood before the fateful bow—was he really the same dark handsome youth who had won her heart on the temple steps? Her soul thrilled with joy, while her heart sank with fear. In her agitated condition she did not hear what the herald had shouted out. Her prayers arose in the words, "Oh God, help him; help him my God". She repeated unceasingly "I love him, help him to be mine". There is the man one or two whispered; then there was a stir, as if the crowd was growing impatient. Rama gently advanced. The eyes of all who were present in the hall, were fixed upon Rama. He lifted the bow so as to gauge its weight. Sita's heart beat fast. Before the people could say anything, Ramchandra had broken the bow into two. Trumpets were blown and the conch shells sounded.

VI

Janaka looked most happy and advanced towards Rama to wish him well. His beloved daughter had found a suitable husband. Could there have been a greater union than that of the Sun-Prince to the Moon-Princess! The whole *darbar* rose to their feet, as the good King approached to speak to Rama: "It is a great honour to me after waiting patiently to address you Prince of all Kosalas, as my son-in-law and now my dear Prince, let us hasten the joyful wedding ceremony without further delay." Ramchandra paid his homage to Janaka and said "Kind Sir, I am most grateful to you for all the honour you have done me, may I ask you to pardon me that I am unable to accept the offer you have kindly made me. It is not possible for me to marry without my father's sanction. Our revered Bishwamitra has brought us here because he is so proud of my bravery and strength, that he wanted to prove that I am a worthy pupil of my master, the great Basista Deb. I am here without my father's knowledge. On becoming acquainted with the circumstances that brought the Sun-Princes to the *swayambara*, King Janaka despatched an embassy to Ajodhya to inform King Dasaratha of the glorious result of the *swayambara*. In the

meanwhile Sita was awaiting the message from her father to *baran* the hero and receive the congratulations of the ladies of the court. The time passed but brought no satisfaction to her curiosity and wonder silenced the waiting crowd. At last Sita was informed that Ramchandra was waiting for his father's permission. She was happy to know that he was hers and she was his. Sita raised her head, they saw the love light in her eyes, she spoke quietly, saying that God had heard her prayers, and that all would be well. The Maharani expressed a wish one day and said—"There are three other brothers and I shall try and have four weddings together." At this remarks the girls blushed though they looked happy. It was not long before there were four shy brides-elect in the palace of Mithila.

At the court of Ajodhya there had been anxiety for Ramchandra. No news had been received since he set out on his expedition. The conclusion arrived at, was that no success was his, and that Ramchandra must have met his death. Soon this sorrow was changed to joy and gladness—King Janaka's messenger had arrived with the good news. Dasaratha the great Sun King was overjoyed to know that his heir has won so glorious a position, among so many who had attempted to gain the hand of the Royal Princess. He most willingly gave his consent to the marriages of his four sons and sent word to say that he would follow soon with the other two sons.

Such rejoicings and such preparations in the two great kingdoms none can imagine. The King sent a great escort of officers, elephants, horses, chariots, soldiers, sages, wagons laden with gold and gems, raiments for the brides, and hundreds of servants on his retinue. Bharata and Satrugna accompanied him. The great party travelled with speed.

On reaching the boundary of Mithila the King was met by his sons, and the *moon*; Bishwamitra, and supported by them the happy King Janaka. King Dasaratha drove to a garden in the city, where the former King Janaka himself waited to receive him. The meeting of the two venerable monarchs was indeed an impressive sight. These marriages of the children of the Sun and Moon Kings were to unite the Kshatriya races of the two peoples. These unions,

though so romantically brought about, were full of political significance, for it was the '*Treta*' or the Silver age of India.

When Janaka Raj met the great King of *Raghuvansa*, and saw the other two Princes, tears of joy filled his eyes, and with clasped hands, he prayed to the All-merciful. "God" said he "merciful God, thou knowest all. I was anxious for my beloved Sita's future; but thou hast taken from me all my anxiety."

Dasaratha and his retinue, were accommodated in palatial buildings in the gardens of the city. The marriages were celebrated with great splendour, the most renowned *gurus* (clergymen) presiding at the ceremony. Lovely Sita placed her hand in Rama's and vowed herself his for ever. Urmila pledged herself to Lakshmana, Mandavi to Bharata, and Srutakirti to Satrugna; thus the *Surya* and *Chandravansas* were united by the sacred bond of marriage.

Then came the parting on the following day. The eyes which had been lighted with joy, were now filled with sad tears. Mithila was losing her precious maidens. Never more could they return to Videha. Sadness filled Janaka's heart—the bridal *raths* were in the courtyard, Sita and her sisters had bidden farewell to all, and Sita knelt at her father's feet to receive his blessing. The saint-king took Sita's hand in his trembling clasp, and leading her to Ramachandra, who stood beside his chariot, placed it in the strong manly palm of the Prince, saying in a voice broken with the sadness of parting, "Sri Ramachandra my son, I have given you my treasure, guard her well and never forsake her. She is tender and loving, see, my dear son, that the storm of this world touches not her flower-like life. Cherish her lovingly, and in time you will understand what you have taken from Mithila." Sita's soul was filled with sorrow at the parting but when Rama's fingers closed on her hands, her heart thrilled, as he reverently answered—"Sir, what Mithila to-day loses, Ajoydhya gains. These tears which thy dear eyes are shedding upon our hands, are sacred to me and by them, I swear I shall be true to thy daughter. Bless me, father, that I may be worthy of thy priceless gift". Sita and Rama touched the saintly Janaka's feet, and entering the chariot drove away. The

King stood to watch the procession, till he could see them no longer, with a deep sigh he turned away to the field to plough. His heart was sad, for he was filled with the idea that Sita would not be happy, found in the furrows, horn of the earth, as if to suffer.

VII

In the *rath* sat Sita, by her young husband, beaming with joy. Rama with his deep and loving voice was filling her heart. Mithila faded fast from her vision. A dark handsome face, and a pair of love-illumined eyes gazed into her own making the world a place of sunshine, which was heaven itself for her.

They continued on their journey, but alas! Sita did not long enjoy her happiness. Parashurama who was returning from a pilgrimage, met the marriage procession, and enquired what it all meant. He was informed that the eldest son of Dasaratha Maharajah had married the Moon-Princess Sita, and were on their return journey to the Royal home Ajodhya. "What, broken my bow!" he shouted angrily. "Where is he? I shall fight him and if I am defeated, I shall then know that he has really broken my bow, and therefore deserves the lovely Sita." King Dasaratha trembled with fear and cried aloud, "Oh, mighty warrior, I beg of you, I pray, I implore you, spare my son." Parashurama was a Brahmin, he had taken the *diksha* (oath) for the Kshatriya, and Dasaratha knew it well. The war cry was alarming, and poor little Sita, clung to her lord, and begged him not to leave her. Rama kissing her and gently disengaging himself from her said, "I must go, after winning you what do I fear?" Then descending from the *rath*, Ramchandra faced the Brahmin. Parashurama had a giant stature, his dress was of skins, and a string of beads (*rudraksha*) hung from his right ear, and on his body he wore the number twenty-one, which signified that in the fulfilment of his *diksha*, he had killed twenty-one Kshatriyas. The gleam of his eyes was cast on Rama, and he asked, "was it you, who dared to break the bow of Parashurama? Do you think you are stronger than I?" "How could I?" Rama answered lightly, "when thou art "Parashurama" and I, the simple "Rama". This jesting still more

incensed the Brahmin and he shouted tauntingly "Thou hast chosen thy death". "Cease thy foolish talk" answered Rama "am I not a gallant Kshatriya, and is fear known to any child of the sun? I broke thy bow, and it did not need much strength, since it was old and weak."

"Now since you seem averse from flight, will you string this bow of mine and discharge an arrow from it?" and the gigantic Brahmin took from off his shoulder an enormous bow and held it out to Rama, saying, "If you can do this, I shall consider myself defeated by you, but if your courage fails you, make an appeal to me and beg your own safety and protection. This will prove that your fingers have been in vain hardened by the twanging of the bow strings." For reply the Sun-Prince smiled and stretched out his hand for the proffered bow. Then with confidence that was apparent, he placed one end of the weapon in the ground, and bending it, strung it most easily. The scornful sparkle disappeared from Parashurama's face leaving it livid, and ashen: the fire which had burnt within him had died out. The whole procession was filled with awe at this procedure and gazed at the two who were facing each other. Rama like the Sun with his increased splendour and brilliancy, Parashurama humiliated with defeat and dimmed glory. The Sun-Knight was full of compassion for his vanquished foe. The arrow which had been fixed must be discharged. Addressing the Brahmin, he said, "Do not fear, I would not bury this in your heart, instead, I will shoot it into the air, far up into the skies, to bar your entrance into heaven." "You have merited this by your sacrifices" humbly Parashurama replied, "Be it as thou wilt. I know who thou art, and it was to see thy power manifested on earth that I provoked thee. I am grateful to thee for sparing my life." And he fell with his face to the ground, and worshipped Ramchandra. Ram then stood a little aside to shoot the arrow into the skies, touching the feet of the Brahmin he said, "Deference to a conquered enemy leads to glory." "Thou hast indeed blessed me and turned my defeat into glory," he answered, "the touch of thy hand has freed me from the evil passion of life. Oh thou divine one, thou hast given me eternal peace. I go to enjoy everlasting bliss, which thou hast awarded to me," and he disappeared.

King Dasaratha kissed Rama's forehead saying, "my precious son, I thought Parashurama would destroy you, and all of us. God has spared us. Let us hasten and return to Ajodhya." Sita proudly drew her husband to her side, and they continued on their journey in peace.

Ramchandra talked of his childhood, his mother and other queens in all which Sita was much interested, for she had already begun to feel that whatever belonged to her husband was dear to her. A longing arose to know every detail, to be established in his name.

The towers and battlements of Ajodhya were in sight now, her pulse beat faster, her heart leaped with joy. They were entering the city gates, the archways were decorated with flowers and palms and *mangal ghos* were placed on both sides of the roads, alternately with banana palms. Flags and mottoes of welcome were hung from the houses, every window and balcony contained young and old faces, which were filled with eagerness and curiosity to see the newly married brides pass. They were pleasantly surprised at Sita's beauty, her loveliness filled them with a desire to show their appreciation. Flowers were thrown in their path, bells rung and the conch shells sounded and there was much rejoicing amongst the people. Sita was overcome, her eyes were dim with tears, she rested her hand on Rama's shoulder, she felt she wanted an assurance from him, that she would truly be welcome to his people. Her disquieted condition grieved Rama who said, "my wife are you sad? Why these tears? Dry your eyes, my Sita and smile and be the sunshine of my life. You are my wife and my love, my beautiful bride, be happy." "My Lord," she whispered, "I am happy, very happy. Why the tears came I cannot quite tell, my only fear is, that perhaps the people of Ajodhya will not like me, to me it seems as though a dark shadow hangs over me." "Oh Sita think not such thoughts, the people will love you and I shall be jealous of them." He kissed her finger tips lovingly. "I am satisfied" she said "with your love I want nothing else, in your company, always I am content. You will never leave me?" "Never" he said "the days will be too short for me to revel in your charms" and he drew her closer to him and looked into her eyes, she was fair,

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he thought very fair and very beautiful, and his deep voice trembled with love as he murmured, "My queen, my life, my love, my Sita, leave you, never, every moment away from you would seem like a year. Life without you would be a living death."

The *raths* proceeded to the great entrance of the palace, where already was standing Dasaratha on the steps to welcome and to bless their home coming. Girls of noble birth were in readiness to receive them, carrying golden *gharras* filled with coins. As Rama's chariot approached and entered the palace gate coins were thrown out of these *gharras*. These rolled in between their feet and under the wheels of the chariots and the girls cried out "Long may you live, may you always walk on gold." Again the conch shells were blown and the trumpets sounded while Rama and Sita ascended the steps and fell at the feet of the King to receive his blessing, then followed Bharata and Mandavi and the twin brothers with their wives. The mother Queens, patiently and anxiously were waiting a little higher up the steps, with their ladies in waiting, to administer the *baran*. It was a joyous occasion. When the *baran* ceremonies were over, Queen Kansalya drew her son with his bride near to her, making them sit before her. She spoke with a mother's affection and pride and shed tears of joy. The unassuming manners of Sita won the queen's heart. She grew to love the furrow-born princess as much as she loved her son. Next day was the flower ceremony, the *andar* of the palace was filled with mirth for all the ladies of the court had assembled to dress the bride with flowers. In the centre was a throne made of flowers on which Sita sat covered with blossoms. The jewels she wore added to the charms of the scene. She was sprayed with scent and was given *pan* (betel leaf) to eat. A garland of fragrant flowers was thrown around her neck and also one round Rama's which they exchanged one with the other. When this portion of the ceremony was over, a girl of the Court carried on a golden tray a crown made of flowers to Rama, which he placed on Sita's head with great admiration and love. In the midst of their rejoicings, Rama's attention was attracted by drops of blood on Sita's forehead, a large drop being in the centre, where the spot of *sindoor* was. He lifted the crown off her head

to find it contained a big thorn. Alas! was her crown to be a crown of sorrows!

VIII

Life flowed on in a dream of happiness at the Palace of Ajodhya for Sita and her sisters. They knew no sorrow or trial. Sita was Rama's whole existence, her devotion to him gratified his longing, her life was framed in the letters of his name. One spirit, one soul was theirs. As the years passed, the Crown Prince Rama became the right hand of the King, who was growing old and very weary of the burden of an Empire. He longed to yield his throne and power to his son, and devote the remaining years of his life to God. So he called a council and imparted to his ministers and nobles the desire of his heart. They readily consented; for in those days it was thought right for a man, as he grew old, to set his affairs in order and retire. Ramchandra heard with deep regret his father's decision. His soul shrank from the undertaking, and he feared a position of publicity. The thought of the future filled Rama and Sita with dread, they could not reconcile themselves to the idea of becoming King and Queen. However, it must be done. Destiny had called them, they must obey. Sita would render all possible help in the discharge of duty, her husband she knew would shine as Maharajah, and his name would live for ever. The crowning ceremony was a great festival. Invitations were sent out to all the Rajahs and Maharajahs of India. Prince Bharata was sent to Persia to invite his maternal uncle, King Kekoya and Satrugna accompanied him. Their return was delayed and Dasaratha was anxious to have the coronation over for he was most impatient to see his beloved son Ramchandra crowned soon.

Keykaya, the favourite queen of Dasaratha, had great affection for Ramchandra and was delighted at the thought of his succession; so pleased was she that she presented all her maids in waiting with gifts. To her favourite maid Manthara, of whom she was very fond, she wished to give a pearl necklace. Now this Manthara had come from Persia with Queen Keykaya when a bride. She was devoted to her mistress and her son Prince Bharata. Manthara was handsome and clever, but was hunch-backed the result of a fall. The knowledge

of Rama's approaching succession to the throne had filled her with extreme jealousy and anger, she then plotted and schemed for Bharata. The gift of the necklace had given Manthara the opportunity for which she had cunningly waited. She received the jewel disdainfully, asking the Queen why she so foolishly rejoiced at the coronation of Rama. "Why should I not?" asked the Queen in her usual simple way. "It is your downfall," answered the mischief maker, "you have always been the Maharajah's favourite Queen, now he is abdicating and making Ramchandra the King. Where will you be then? Oh poor Queen, is it right that you should be put away and forgotten, you with all your regal appearance and high birth, daughter of the King of Persia. Have you not a son? In what way is Bharata inferior to Rama that he should not be King?" At first the Queen would not hear of it, but Manthara was very persistent and at last succeeded in persuading Keykaya to listen to her. The Queen then said, "Oh Manthara you are the only friend I have in this kingdom, you are the only one who loves me."

When the ceremony of the *adhibash* was over, during the interval, Maharajah Dasaratha sought his favourite wife. He found Keykaya upon the floor, her jewels strewn about, and her hair in a most disorderly condition. "Dearest what ails you?" the King said, bending over her prostrated form. A passion of tears and sobs was Keykaya's only answer, and the awful paroxysms alarmed the King. He raised her from the floor, endeavouring to calm her, but with little success. At last, distracted with anxiety, the King shouted for assistance. The Queen was intensely pleased at heart and she knew her hour had come. She drew herself away from him saying, "Your Majesty, I wish to go back to my brother." "What," said the King, "are you not happy with me?" "I want to go to Persia and to my people. I shall be happier there." "Then you do not love me," said the King, "I love you my dear wife. Oh, my dear Keykaya, has anybody hurt or injured you? Tell me I pray you, I would give my life for your happiness." After a good deal of persuasion, she said, "You have not forgotten, you must remember, how I, some years ago, nursed you on your bed of sickness. How I helped you in your time of trouble

then you were much pleased with me and offered me two boons, and now to day I want them I claim them " "They are yours beloved," said the King, "speak and I shall listen " Then the Queen in a calm and quiet voice spoke the most cruel words her husband had ever heard It deafened him when she said "I want my son to be crowned King and Ramchandra to be banished to the forests for fourteen years " Did he hear a right? was he in a delirium? was he going mad? Crown Bharata and banish Ramchandra His head became dizzy, his feet tottered, but it was all too true Queen Keykaya repented her demand again and again, till it was impossible for Dasaratha not to realise the meaning of her words The King cried out, "I don't know what you are saying " She again repeated that her son should be crowned The King pleaded with her, besought her to ask for any other thing in the kingdom, but nothing was of any avail She was hard and relentless The King swooned with exhaustion and grief, but she persisted in her claim It was now the last hour of the evening, the hour of sun set, the temples, palaces, turrets and minarets of Ajodhya were standing out against the purple sky The town was to be illuminated with myriads of oil lamps for the *rajyabhishek* or crowning ceremony of Ramchandra The courtiers awaited the arrival of the self abdicating King in *darbar* and when the hour arrived, and he was still absent from the *darbar*, they grew anxious and Ramchandra went himself to discover the cause of the delay Rama lost no time in gaining admittance to his father Dasaratha lay on the floor, a picture of abject distress and grief, the Maharani sat sullenly by his side When the King saw his son entering the room he cried out in a tone of acute suffering, "Rama, my son Rama, do not leave me, do not leave me " The Prince was very much alarmed with his father's changed appearance He stood in silence for what might follow Not another word escaped the father's lips, and the silence was broken at intervals by deep sighs and low groans, oh, that his father would speak Time passed and there seemed no end to the suspense At last Rama broke the silence, "Father, tell me what ails thee? What is thy sorrow?" Still no reply, no movement even, the King lay like one in death Exasperated with anxiety, Rama turned to the queen,

"What is it that troubles my father? Mother tell me pray " The queen was perfectly aware of Rama's love for his father and in obedience to his wishes said, "The Maharajah is in despair and is too sad to tell you " "Don't heed what she says, she is a wicked woman," the King shouted The Prince knelt beside the form of the king assuring him of his unfailing devotion and obedience, but the king's grief was augmented instead of being appeased, and he started out in a frenzy crying aloud, "Oh, the wicked woman, the wicked woman " Ramchandra could bear it no longer, he urged the queen to speak, and she did, with a hard cold expression, half of defeat and half of triumph as the king's whole frame shook "Years ago ' she said, "I saved your father's life He promised me two favours and I now claim them I claim that my son Bharata be crowned and you are to be in exile in the forests for fourteen years The King loves you too well, he cannot speak as he should, but I have spoken for him " "Is that it, mother? I shall be happy to see my dear brother Bharata on the throne " Keykaya dreaded she knew not what—"There is no need for you to wait to see Bharata on the throne," she said, "you should go into the forest at once " Dasaratha begged Rama not to listen to her, not to go, "she is a wicked woman" he said "don't go, don't leave me, the parting will kill me, I shall never see you again Oh, my son, my son, what will the world say? that I have been led by a woman, a wicked woman, that I have exiled my heir, that I have disgraced the *Raghuansa* " In a pathetic voice Rama replied, falling at his most respected and aged father's feet "I worship God in Heaven and I worship you on earth, your loving hand has guided me all these years in the paths of truth, I shall not be an obstacle to your keeping your word, dear father, let me go, it will be well, father, give me your consent to go—Bless me—your blessing will strengthen me and will guide me " But Dasaratha would not do so, and only murmured, "Rama, Rama, my son "

IX

Ramchandra was much concerned as to how he should break the news to his own mother and wife—both much he loved Kausalya Dehi was still in her

shibalaya (sanctuary) praying to *Shiva* for his blessing upon her son. Rama called out to her, she recognised his voice. The room was full of various offerings, such as money, jewellery, flowers, fruit and sweets, and incense was burning. Rama gazed at it all for a while. The Queen looked wonderfully happy. Ramchandra touched her feet, the mother lovingly lifted her son and kissed his forehead affectionately. "I have come to you dear mother" Ramchandra said, "for you to bless me." "All my blessings are with you, my child" she replied, "may *Shiva*, our God, with his *devas*, shower you with his richest and choicest blessings long may you live and long may you reign." Ramchandra could contain himself no longer. He recalled all that happened between his father and step-mother, Queen Keykaya. Poor Queen Kausalya fainted and fell to the ground. When she came to her senses, she wept bitterly. She would not remain in the Palace either, she would go with his son, without him she wanted no kingdom, no position. Kausalya would go to the jungle with Rama and Sita and live there in much more happiness than in the Palace without her children. She argued the subject with herself and with her son, but Rama was steadfast. "What is life without honour" he said "I shall go and thus fulfil my father's promise." The Queen was disconsolate, what could she say to prevent him? At last she said, "Rama, my son, as your mother I forbid you to go to the forest." The Prince answered quietly, "It is my duty, mother, I am under obedience to my father and came here to say goodbye to you, and ask you for your blessings, dear mother, that I may prove a worthy son to my father. The best of mothers you have been. All my life I have heard you say, you wished me to be a good son to my father. This is the time when you, dear mother, should help me to prove your wishes." Then the mother answered indignantly, "A man who is under a woman's influence, his words are of no importance." Then the son knelt down and said, "Mother, your tender love for your son is making you say all this. Forgive me, but I must do my duty to my father and return after fourteen years, you will be more proud of your son then." Rama touching his mother's feet once more said "The 14 years will soon pass dear and best of mothers and you again lya

bowed to the inevitable, with a heavy heart and blessed her son. Now what had to be done, that, troubled Rama most—he must tell his wife, but how was he to do it? He turned his steps to his own Palace. He was filled with anxious thoughts, his courage was almost failing him—not for himself, but for his wife. On entering her room he found her in readiness for him, dressed in her richly embroidered robes, which his mother had got ready for the occasion. Her face flushed with pleasure at her husband's entrance, she held out her hands to him and said "What is the cause of this delay beloved?" and he took her in his arms. Sita listened to all he said, fully understanding and entering into his feeling as to his duty, quite oblivious as he was to the loss of the throne and state. When he spoke of farewell to her, she would not listen. "I married you, my Prince, for yourself alone and nothing shall ever come between us." With tenderest caresses Rama answered that jungle life would be full of hardships and she could never accompany him. "Beloved, when mother Keykaya told me of my father's promise and of her wishes, I saw what my future would be, but my Sita, that will in no way constrain you. Ever since your childhood you have lived in, and been surrounded by luxury. My sweet wife, it will not be possible for you to live a forest life." "My Lord" said the Princess softly, and looked up into his face, her eyes full of tears. Rama looked into them, his own reflection was there, for Sita's heart was full of Rama. "I implore you" whispered Sita, "take me with you." "My dear one, my task is difficult enough, I must go alone to live like a hermit. Be patient and wait for me." Sita listened to it all, and she fell at his feet. "My master, My Lord," she said, "I shall go, nothing can stop me, else I would die. In the forest you will be a hermit, I shall be your follower, you will be a ruler, I shall be your subject, you will be the master, and I shall be your servant." Rama was deeply touched, his heart was filled with pride and lifting her up, he caught her in his arms and asked "Am I worthy of such love?" Sita clung to him "Without you" she said "I would not live in heaven. Deserted by you, I should cease to breathe. With you I shall fear no weariness, know no hardships, I shall follow wherever you go, as Savitri followed Death for her Satyaban, so I shall follow you. Say me nay no longer,

let me come with you, and we shall spend the fourteen years happily together " Rama could not withstand such love She was the crown of his life and as he kissed her he revered and loved her more than ever and thanked God for his treasure Leaving Sita for a while he went to his brother Lakshmana to say goodbye Lakshmana, too, wished to accompany him, saying "I shall go with you and serve you both " Rama was unwilling to permit this, but Lakshmana insisted Manthara, the hunch back had lost no time in spreading the news of Rama's banishment Disappointment and grief filled every heart When Keykaya saw Rama, with his wife and brother about to set out for the forest, her heart leapt with triumph at her success The Crown Prince still wore his coronation robes and Sita stood by his side appalled as his consort "Rama and Sita" she said scornfully "you should dress as hermits, not in such grand robes " "Certainly mother, you are right, will you order some hermit's garments for us?" Rama answered brightly All wondered at his cheerful demeanour The people of Ajodhya wept for the unjust treatment Rama had suffered He, their good true and brave prince who had brought so much light to their kingdom Before long Queen Keykaya ordered three sets of *balkal* (bark of a tree) to be brought, and giving one to each brother, she approached Sita with one also At this King Dasaratha shouted out in a voice full of wrath, "Touch not the daughter of Raghuvar, she shall go from my house dressed as daughter of this state Keykaya trembled and let the *balkal* drop to the floor In hermit's garb Rama knelt before his father and said, "Sire, our ancestors have all been good rulers and you have instilled in me that king's duty is the welfare of his subjects Bless me now and let me go Pray that I should be given the strength to walk in the ways of virtue Grieve not for me " In a dejected voice the King cried, "Rama, Rama, my son, I shall never see you again", and sobbed his heart out Sita, beautiful as a dream in her bridal robes, had knelt beside her husband with Lakshmana and received the blessings from the king Queen Kausalya stricken with her sorrow, wished them farewell, she embraced Sita and blessed her, "May the Gods of the *Suryavansa* reward you for your fidelity to my son You are one amongst thousands of women I bless you my

daughter, and I pray that you will ever be true and follow your husband with the same devotion always " Sita touched the grieving queen's feet and replied, "Fear not, my mother, I shall not fail My husband is my God Believe me that I shall give my life for him and for his happiness " The crowd was great in Ajodhya The young, the old, the rich, and the poor, men and women, were all out to see their Ramchandra and Sita When the state chariot drove up to the entrance, they cried to see their Prince depart from amongst them Rama too was pale He spoke encouragingly to them, and quickly, for he wished to close the scene He lifted Sita into the chariot and they drove away, Lakshmana seated beside the driver The crowd followed, some keeping pace with the spirited horses, while others begged the charioteer to drive slowly Cries of regret followed the chariot as the wheels rolled along At the river Tamasa, Ramchandra decided to halt for the night The crowd had kept pace with the chariot and refused to return to the city Soon all slept, save Ramchandra, whose soul felt for his subjects and their distress At the first streak of dawn he awakened his wife and brother and said to them, "Let us take our departure before these poor people awake It is cruel to prolong their grief " Silently they arranged their going and started off, and by sunrise they had crossed the river Gumti, which is the southern boundary of Kosala Evening found them on the north bank of the Ganges near Prayaga Ajodhya was now well behind Rama accordingly said goodbye to the driver Sumantra, who fell at Rama's feet and cried Rama spoke kindly and sent many messages to his parents The driver was told to drive the empty carriage to Ajodhya, while the royal group walked on, his eyes were fixed on them, his thoughts full of sadness The chief of the place Guhaka Chandala, lent a boat for Rama and his party to cross the river at the confluence of the Ganges and Jumna There the great saint Agastya welcomed them and would have gladly received the royal hermits as his permanent guests, but Rama feared that if he remained at Prayaga, the people of Ajodhya would be continually visiting him So Agastya told him that the hill of Chitrakuta was about twenty miles or more away, in a deep forest, where Rama could live happily Rama decided to go there, and early next morning

the royal exiles crossed the Jumna. The hills of Chitrakuta are a continuation of the Vindya mountains and the name means "Peak of beauty", and well it deserves the name. They reached Chitrakuta. It was a lovely spot, peaceful and quiet. Ramchandra would have failed in loyalty to his king had he strayed near enough to Ajodhya as to permit visits from the people. Sita's liking of this forest was as great as Rama's and Lakshmana agreed to everything that Rama wished. So the party prepared to make Chitrakuta their resting place and they soon built a little hut of branches and leaves.

X

Now in Ajodhya all was sorrow, deep sorrow. After parting with his beloved son and heir, King Dasaratha was overwhelmed with grief and died. The good queens did all they could putting aside their own grief but to no avail. Once or twice he spoke of Rama, spoke of his great sorrow, that of dying without seeing his boy. His grief was intense, and with his son's name on his lips he died. Terrible was the grief in the Palace when King Dasaratha's soul took its flight from this world, and more sad was the nation when on such an occasion, no son was there to perform the last rites of consigning the body to the purifying flames. A few days after the death of the King, the Princes, Bharata and Satrugna, returned from Persia. Unconscious of the happenings at the court of Kosala, and of the bereavement which had befallen them, they observed as they rode through the city, that the gloom of mourning overshadowed it. What could have happened? They wondered. Bharata soon arrived at the Palace where the same mysterious silence reigned. He marvelled at it, hurrying along to his mother's apartment he enquired after touching her feet into the cause of this unusual calm and the dreadful silence in Ajodhya. Was the nation in sorrow? He begged to be told immediately. His mother told him of his father's death, and the news was most unexpected and unwelcome and he stood motionless for a time. Then she informed him of his own succession to the throne of the *Suryavansa*.

"The Maharajah" cried Bharata in horror "where is my brother Ram

chanda? Has he gone?" "Yes gone to the forest" she replied exultingly, and then with many words of praise for Monthara, to whom she gave all the credit, she related the manner in which she had secured the throne for him. Bharata looked furious at this. When he understood the wicked motive of his mother, he drew his sword from its case and wanted to kill her, when Satrugna rushed up to him and said "Brother, have you forgotten who you are—the son of King Dasaratha? Your mother is always your mother, whether kind or unkind. You are Keykaya's son. Do not stain your sword or your hand with the blood of your own mother, who bore you." Bharata looked at his brother, whom he loved dearly and said, "Satrugna, I feel ashamed of myself for being the son of such a mother. Why did I not leave the world before this happened? Our beloved brother Ramchandra is exiled because of me. Were I dead?" Then again in a rage he said, "I shall not kill my mother, but I shall kill that woman Monthara, who is the cause of all this trouble." Bharata's sympathy was with queen Kausalya and to her he hastened, to comfort and assure her of his unfailing loyalty to Rama, who, he maintained was the lawful heir and King. The noble Kausalya wept with the brothers. Their grief was great, the humiliation of Rama and the death of their father were cruel blows. The queen mourned, she keenly felt the whole position. The throne stood empty and her lord living dead. Bharata used every effort to console mother Kausalya. "We cannot bring back our dear departed father, but we must do our sacred duty to the body of our father, whom we loved and then we shall try and bring back our Rama."

Bharata's determination was a great disappointment to his own mother. She strove her utmost to overrule his decision, but he spurned her, saying, "I cannot look upon you as my mother any longer. A woman who uses cruel means to attain her object, I cast aside. You have killed my father and exiled my innocent brother. I know you no longer."

His face was filled with shame and indignation, he suffered acutely. Kausalya felt for Bharata as much as she did for Rama, perhaps more, for her son had gone out in cheerful obedience to his exile, while Bharata was bearing

the results of his mother's disgraceful conduct. In the absence of the eldest son, Bharata performed the cremation rites of his father. When the sad ceremony was over he convened a royal council, taking his seat at the foot of the steps of the throne. He informed the *darbar* that it was his intention to seek his brother Rama, acquaint him of their father's death and impress upon him that the throne awaited him. The times were threatening and a kingdom without a ruler would be in a perilous condition. Bharata scorned the advice, and said he never could take Rama's place. It was his duty to try to find his brother and to bring him back to Ajodhya. Bharata's decision was welcomed and he started for the forests with a large military equipage. Queen Kausalya, Prince Satrugna and several of the high officials, accompanied him and helped him to carry out his plan.

Lakshmana discovered the great military equipage advancing towards Chitrakuta, and felt fearful of Rama's safety; thinking that they were not satisfied with his banishment and now wanted his blood. He made his doubts and fears known to Rama, who answered him with the greatest confidence. He knew very well that Bharata was not capable of any treachery. "Rama" said Bharata leaving his *rath* and coming towards him "my brother, my brother".

Rama received him with open arms and lifting him up asked, "my father, how is he?" Every detail of the monarch's death was told to Rama. He listened attentively with his heart breaking with grief. He knew the loss his mother had sustained, he knew the bitterness of the whole of the people of Ajodhya. His brother implored him to return and complete the coronation. Every argument and entreaty was made but had no effect. Rama remained inflexible and in answer to all their pleadings said "Dear brother, my affection for you will always be the same, but I regret that I cannot comply with your wishes and Bharata you must help me. I only know the law of obedience as my guide. Crowns and kingdoms are but floating straws on the ocean of life. Duty alone is firm and everlasting. Do not forget, I must help and fulfil my father's promise. Surely his death as a victim and his promise is an influence over my life. Go back, my brother, I know you will rule well in the place of the great Dasaratha. You are the worthy son of our dear father and doubtless

a fit monarch for Ajodhya. The subjects of Ajodhya will be happy under your rule, as happy as they were in the days of our father. I must do my duty." Bharata felt his helplessness. Rama was steadfast. Bharata kneeling before his brother with clasped hands bid him goodbye and Rama said "Bharata, dear brother, remember, this is sacred duty to me to be in the jungle. I came out to fulfil father's promise. Fourteen years will pass and we shall meet again. As you know Bharata, we are four brothers, but four in one. I shall do my duty in the jungle-life to our father. You serve the subjects and do your duty, thus to our father. We are united in soul and shall always be near each other. Then he kissed Bharata's forehead and said goodbye and Sita shed many a tear and said farewell. Bharata and the Royal party returned to Ajodhya, he proclaimed that he ruled only as a Regent, and always sat on the lowest step of the throne. Building himself a hut outside the city walls, he lived the life of an anchorite, dressing in *balka* and eating wild fruits. Lakshmana had vowed to serve Rama so Satrugna vowed to serve Bharata. The Princesses Mandavi and Srutakirti joined their husbands in their lives of austerity, Urmilla lived a life of penance within the palace walls, serving the Queen-mothers. Their saintly lives still shine as examples to the dwellers of Bharatbarsa. How perfectly those days of forest-life passed for Sita.

XI

The royal hermits proceeded further south making friends with others who dwelt in the same way. In the course of their travels they came to a hermitage of a great sage named Atri, whose wife was much pleased with Sita and her beauty. She made Sita many handsome gifts of jewellery. Agastya, another forest sage, presented Rama with a bow of exquisite workmanship and a quiver of needle-pointed arrows and also gave him a two-aged sword.

"Take these" he said, "and if you are in need of them, they will help you." ~~Very shortly they reached the banks of the Godavari where Rama built a hut in the wooded space of Panchabati where they lived for years; the surroundings were fair and appealed to the royal exiles; Sita loved this spot. To watch the~~

dancing ripples of the river enchanted her, the halm of the evening breeze solaced her, the rays of the setting sun illumined her evening prayers. The memory of her perfect life still remains all over Bharata's land. The Sister of Ravana, named Surpanakha, was attracted by the handsome Rama and tried to tempt him with her beauty. Rama showed her his wife who was seated close by and said "How can I marry you for I am already married. Here is my wife. But there is my brother, go and ask him to marry you." Then Surpanakha began to talk of her love to Lakshmana who drew his arrow, striking her nose off her face. Surpanakha after being insulted by Lakshmana went straight to Lanka and told her brother of the beauty of Sita. Ravana then hastened to *Panchabati* where Ramchandra dwelt. He sent the powerful Maricha of Lanka disguised as a golden deer. Maricha wished to avenge himself on Rama for the death of his mother the Taraka. Ravana dressed himself as a *Yogi*. One afternoon when Rama and Sita were sitting in the shade of a tree facing the forest, before them a golden deer rushed past. Sita animated with a desire to possess the skin of it, mentioned this to Rama, who straightaway took his bow and arrow, and leaving Sita with Lakshmana, gave instructions that she was not to be left unattended for a moment. He then went after the animal and Sita watched Rama disappear and then went back to her hut. The *Rakshasas* were very troublesome, hence Rama's instructions as to Sita's care. Lakshmana was on guard outside the hut. He had only been gone a few minutes when they heard Rama calling, "Lakshmana, come and save me."

Sita grew pale with anxiety and stepping forward told Lakshmana to rush to Rama's help. He would not stir from his post, saying that he must obey the orders given to him by Rama. Another cry and then another, yet Lakshmana would not move. His brother could never be defeated, he argued. Another heart rending cry was heard, "I am dying Lakshmana, I am dying." Even at this cry Lakshmana's expression did not change. Sita, exasperated accused her brother in law of disloyalty to her husband and a disregard to her wish. She said scornfully, "I know what your motive is, Lakshmana. I know why you came out to the jungle with us, Sumitra Devi should be ashamed of

her son, one brother has taken the kingdom away from my lord and you are anxious to take his wife away from him. Now I know all and if you do not go and rescue my husband, I shall go myself. You can stay here in the empty hut, and do as you like. Lakshmana, little I knew that your words were of malice and your mind so full of poison," and many other harsh and cruel words she spoke. This was the only time when Sita uttered any unkind words.

On hearing this Lakshmana lifted up his bow and said "Mother, I should not have listened to all these cruel words you have spoken to-day. I have great reverence for you ever since you became the wife of Sri Ramchandra, whom I love and adore, moreover he is my God, and he is all that I hold dear. Your words have pierced me through my heart and it is for that reason I am doing what you have bid me to do. But remember Sita Devi that it is the first time in my life that I have disobeyed my lord, my master Ramchandra." Lakshmana was so intensely disquieted that he decided to leave Sita to her own devices, yet considering that her safety was at stake he hesitated. Before he left her he warned her of her dangerous position and asked her not to step across the seven lines he had encircled her hut with. It was not long before Sita realised her loneliness. She felt and desired to call her brother back, but she found that he had gone. Sitting down on the grass she pondered, her mind running in many directions, resulting in a confusion of thoughts. She was not long alone, being disturbed and startled by the presence of an old Yogi standing at a little distance under a tree his gaze fixed on her. She was prompted to speak to him and coming forward she said, "Are you hungry?" "Very hungry" he replied, "kind lady give me something to eat." "My husband will be back soon," she said. "No" he said "I cannot wait. I am starving. If you cannot satisfy my hunger I shall seek food elsewhere, then the curse will fall on your head."

Feeling alarmed at the Yogi's speech, she went and found some fruits, which she offered to him. He begged her to bring it to him as his strength was fast failing him for he was aware of the seven circles drawn about her hut by Lakshmana and the safety they afforded her if not overstepped. Sita thoughtlessly carried him the fruit. He extended his hand to receive it, he grasped

her and putting his strong arm about her and lifting her ran off with her in his chariot which was waiting a little distance away. She struggled with fear and grief and heged again and again to be set free. The chariot was now in flight. It rose hundreds of feet up in the air, travelling at a great pace. Sita denuded herself of her jewels, flinging them away from her. Her mind was bewildered. She knew nothing hut ahject misery. After a while the chariot descended like a huge hird and rested in the palace grounds of Lanka. Ravana begged of Sita to marry him but she resented and said many a threatening word, saying, "When Rama would find her whereabouts Ravana would be killed." Sita was taken to the Asoka gardens and given in charge of two stalwart *Rakshasi* slaves. They punished her and heat her, but Sita was true to her husband, she knew no body but Rama

In the meanwhile, Rama had killed the disguised deer, who was Maricha and was returning home when he met Lakshmana. He was naturally surprised and addressing his brother asked the reason of his departure from the hut and from Sita. Rama was told everything. He fell on his face and wept. He knew that some evil had befallen his wife. He regretted he had ever gone in chase of the deer and Lakshmana repented too of having left the hut and its surroundings. They hurried home and on their arrival Ramchandra found the hut empty. Both brothers searched the jungle high and low hut no trace of Sita could be found. Rama was bewildered with grief and cried aloud "Sita, Sita, where have you gone? I left all those dear to me in Ajodhya hut never felt sad for one moment because Sita you were with me. How could I return to Ajodhya without you, and what shall I say to Janak Raj when he asks 'what have you done with my daughter Sita?' I want no kingdom, no throne, I want you Sita, come back, for we shall live in this hint, in this *Panchabati ban* till the end of our days." It was the first time Lakshmana had seen Ramchandra weep. There were no words to console him, so Lakshmana kept silent. Ramchandra's lamentations filled the forest. The clouds gathered making the forest dark and the birds ceased to sing, Sita's pet animals came near the hut and looked sad. The two brothers after a thorough search in the neighbouring forests journeyed down to

the South. In the middle of the journey they discovered some of Sita's ornaments and they were recognised at once as being Sita's, further on more ornaments were found. An enormous eagle had attacked the chariot. Rama now became acquainted with the flight and all its details, and determined to rescue his beloved wife. Many of the hill tribes which he met as he journeyed South offered him their assistance and pledged themselves in alliance with him against the dominating Ravana. Thus a mighty host surged onward to defeat and destroy the *Rakshasa*. Sugriv, brother of Bali, King of Kiskindha, a state in the Nilgiris along the coast of Bay of Bengal vowed vengeance, and joined Rama. In gratitude of this self-elected help, Rama offered to recompense him in any way he desired. "Help me" Sugriv said, "to attain the throne. I must be king, my brother is the hinderance. Let us slay him." So they fought and Bali was killed. When Bali was dying he said to Rama "why did you not, Oh Ramchandra, tell me that it was only for Ravana you were friendly with Sugriv. I have defeated the monarch of Lanka several times." Bali's wife cursed Rama saying, "you have made me a widow, in order to find your wife. Ramchandra, you will find her but be happy for a short time and my curse will be on you that you may have the great suffering of parting which you have caused me." Sugriv the king, with his army joined Rama and his host and advanced in the direction of Lanka. A great devotee Hanuman was amongst them. He set fire to the island before he left. Rama awaited this spy's return to his camp eager to get some news, for he saw the flames of Lanka rising against the evening sky and felt anxious. His praise and thanks were profuse to him and they planned the bridging of the sea and led their troops. Mercilessly they fought day after day, victory deserted the sons of Ravana, the mighty city of Lanka became a house of mourning. Sita knew all and grieved for the many gallant lives that were being lost, striving and comforting the bereaved wives and mothers. Her anxiety was ten-fold; she had heard that Ramchandra was among the wounded, but this was a groundless suspicion for he was alive and unhurt. Sita's joy at this news invigorated her with new life. It was Dashinani who had brought her the glad tidings and she loved her for it.

"I am your friend" said Sarama, wife of Bibhisan, holding up a finger to warn her, and whispered low, "my husband Bibhisan, though Ravana Maharajah's brother, has pledged himself to Rama and works for thy lord." The friendship between Sita and Sarama daily grew. Sarama admired Sita and often took much pleasure in staining the fair hands and dainty feet with henna and painted sindoor on the fair forehead. She wondered at the want of personal ornaments too: not a single jewel did Sita wear. How is this? She asked one day "Surely Ravana did not rob you of your jewels?" "No" replied Sita, "when I was cruelly captured I wished to leave some trace of myself along the country over which I was taken, so I dropped my jewels one at a time from the chariot." "Is it true Ramachandra was exiled for no fault of his?" asked Sarama. "Yes," said Sita and related the whole story never reproaching anybody, so that Sarama marvelled.

"How did you live in the forest?" she further questioned. "Most happily, my lord and his brother built a small hut in the woods of Panchabati (five big banian trees)." For a while memory with all its sweetness held her, and a wave of longing for his presence consumed her. "Tell me some more," urged Sarama gently, understanding why the eyes of the Princess were wet with tears.

"What did Prince Lakshmana do?" enquired Sarama.

"He? he is the dearest brother I could have. He searched the forest for fruit for us and accompanied my Rama wherever he went, while I stayed at home and prepared meals." "Were you ever lonely?" "Never. I was too happy to be lonely. My lord was there, he loved the forest life and so did I. My happiness was complete, to serve my master was all that I wished." "Did you never regret the loss of your comforts and luxuries, and your grand Palace in Ajodhya?" "No, not for one moment, I loved the forest existence with its many variations. But tell me Sarama, how goes the battle to day?" "Dashaman keeps me a close prisoner, I know very little of what is taking place. Ravana sent for his son the great Indrajit, he arrived last evening," said Sarama "and he has challenged Prince Rama to single combat to-morrow." Sita fixed her eyes on Sarama, looking very anxious. "Will you come to me early to-morrow and tell me the

result of the encounter?" Sita asked Sarama. "I will," she replied, and touching the feet of the captive Princess, she left her. On the morrow Sita was told of the triumphant procession of Promila into the golden city, Lanka, and also how Ramchandra had permitted it. Sita knew that Ramchandra would always be kind to all as his was a grand character. The war filled Sita with an acute depression. "When will it end?" she would say to herself. "And I am the cause of all the misery." Was her lord fighting Indrajit, she wondered. Just then Sarama entered and Sita and Sarama discussed the battle of the day and Sarama told Sita that Indrajit would never fight again as he was killed by Lakshmana. Sita wept for the beautiful Promila, Sarama cried also and said in a sad voice, Promila accompanies her lord through the flaming fires and Mandodari carries a face of death. "Why was I ever born?" cried Sita. "I take misfortune wherever I go, I seem to be the cause of my husband's exile deprived of his rightful inheritance and banished from his own kingdom. Oh! Why was I ever born?" "Dear Princess, weep not," said Sarama, "Our lives are pre-ordained by the great Law and we have to tread in the paths which are destined for us. Turn your thoughts from your sadness, look into the bright future, it is very hopeful, the day of Ram's victory will surely dawn, and then think of the re union. There must be war and there will be peace, it has been thus from the beginning of time."

After the truce for Indrajit's obsequies, for one whole week the golden city mourned and no one touched their weapons or went near the battle field. After the week was over, Ravana's determination to avenge himself grew stronger. Seeking an opportunity, he struck Lakshmana to the earth with his mighty arrow and then fled with his forces. Ramchandra having ascertained that his brother was only wounded and not dead decided to follow the foe with a view to annihilation. This retreat was only strategy. Rama was met with fresh forces and a desperate battle followed. At last Ravana fell, with the arrow of Ramchandra buried in his heart. The shouts of victory reached Sita and her heart beat fast hoping to see her lord, when suddenly the piercing wails of the heart broken queen of Lanka thrilled Sita and frightened her. Glory to Rama, he had won

the battle. The strife and struggle were over. Sita was within easy reach, soon the term of his exile would be over and he would return to his dear country. Ramchandra sent Hanuman to Sita with a message of his victory but never said a word of her coming back to him. Lakshmana's anxiety to regain Sita, knew no restraint. He enquired of Rama when Sita would be brought away from the Palace of Ravana. The reply he got from Rama steeped in indifference and apathy, roused his curiosity indignation Lakshmana said to Rama, "After all these months of suffering and of fighting, in which you have killed so many brave soldiers and destroyed the dynasty of Ravana, that you should behave towards Sita Devi like this, I should have thought your first care would have been Sita's return." "Brother" said Rama, "it will be necessary to free Sita's name from all future reproach, I shall arrange for Bibhisana to escort her here in state "

Sita looked the picture of happiness and Sarama brought a gold box containing priceless jewels and begged Sita to allow her, for the first and last time to touch her and dress her. "Sarama," said Sita, affectionately, "You have been the only hope and joy during my stay here in the Asokaban. I bless you, Sarama, may you be happy all your life." Sarama touched her feet and cried out. "Devi, do not forget me. That is my only prayer to you." As Sita was carried through the streets of Lanka sad cries of woe reached her. "You have made this a land of mourning and for you we have lost our sons and husbands. Oh, you wretched woman, your days of happiness have come, but we curse you and pray that you may not enjoy that happiness long." At this Sita trembled, she felt that some evil omen was awaiting her. When the palanquin reached the entrance of Rama's camp, Sita was unnerved with the reproaches of the women of Lanka and was hardly able to contain herself. Lakshmana approached, and helped her out. Before her stood Rama; in spite of the many eyes which gazed at her, the impulse to throw herself in wifely homage before him was intense. Rama stayed her. Sita's eyes were resting on the dark handsome face so dear to her, but Rama would not look at her. He stood with his head bowed and his eyes cast down, those were moments of anguish, her life seemed

suspended, the cold grip of doubt clenched her heart, she longed to see her husband raise his eyes to hers, she longed to know his thoughts, but this was denied her. In this terrible hour, Rama steeled his heart, for his love for her honour was such that he resolved that all suffering should count as nought, so that she, nearest and dearest to him should be proved pure and true. He knew Sita would stand the test, but would she understand the reason? The terrible dread that she might resent his apparent doubt was agonizing to his soul, but he must risk it for her sake. The ordeal must be gone through thoroughly. He carefully kept his eyes fixed sternly upon the ground and he addressed Sita, "You have been a prisoner in Ravana's Palace all these months, Sita, my wife, I have done my duty as your husband to rescue you and give you freedom, but my duty to my State comes first. How am I to know that you are still true to me, Sita choose where you will dwell and whom you would like to address as your husband. The throng were horrified for the beautiful Queen. Sita stood stabbled to the heart. Was this her own former Rama? Was it the same Rama? Had she lived through the sufferings of her captivity for this? Had the lives of hundreds of heroes lost for her humiliation and disgrace? Tears poured down her face, but she raised her head proudly and said in a voice clear and distinct, "Brother Lakshmana ever ready to obey, make a *agni kundoo* (funeral pyre). It is the only respite from the misfortune that has befallen me." Lakshmana turned in anger and indignation to Rama, but the latter met his eyes and quietly signed him to obey Sita and to make the pyre. Mournfully the order was given for the wood, and soon the pile was erected and set ablaze. Rama stood with a face of death like pallor, none dared to speak. Sita walked slowly seven times round her husband and worshipped his feet, and facing the crowd she said, "If my love for my husband is true and stainless, if my virtue is untouched, then even fire cannot touch me." Walking to the funeral pile, she folded her hands in prayer and addressed it, "Oh fire, witness of all the world, receive me, the flames protect me whose life has ever been true and pure." Sita jumped in, the pile of burning wood crashed and fell the flames and smoke enveloped her. Cries of horror and lamentation ascended. The scene was an

appalling one. Rama was overcome with grief and cried out, "Sita, Sita, pardon, forgive me. Never shall I try your chastity again. For you, and for you alone I came here and fought Ravana. Do not leave me, do not go." Gradually the smoke abated and a soft strain of music was heard. In the heart of the flames stood Sita beside Agni (the God of fire). The fire went out and Sita came forward unhurt by the flame. Ramchandra was most happy to see Sita and with clasped hands asked her to forgive him. Sita bowed and kneeling touched his feet in reverence. Rama stood abashed. Raising her to his side, he spoke in strong voice, "My Queen is chaste, the fire has proved it." Voices from above were heard, "Ramchandra, Sita's love for you is pure and true." The fourteen years of exile was over.

Rama put Bhisma on the throne of Lanka and said goodbye to Sugriva and all his other friends and thanked them for the great help he had received from them all except Hanuman who accompanied him. He left his other friends in Lanka, saying farewell with many sad words, and left for his kingdom. Using the car in which his wife had been carried by Ravana, he sped onward. Sita sat beside him in the sweet assurance of their reunion. All was well with her now, she felt, many a look and word were exchanged during their flight. They neared Kosala and the car descended to earth. Rama who had sent Hanuman in advance to inform Bharata of his coming, looked forward to the meeting with his brother. Clouds of dust announced the approach of Bharata. It was at Chitrakut, the place where the brothers had parted, fourteen years ago. Bharata was coming to welcome them. As the car descended, Rama left it and advanced to greet his dear brother. They embraced one another and turning to the crowd, Rama gave a look of general welcome to all. Arriving at Ajodhya a state entry was in preparation. When they got to the Palace gates all came to welcome them, except Queen Keykeya and Rama noticed this and said, "It is not possible for me not to leave my car until mother Keykeya comes." The other Queen mothers and ladies of the Palace said, "She is too frightened to come." Ramchandra refused to leave the *rath* (car) and after a time Keykeya came looking much ashamed of herself. Ramchandra then left

the car and touching her feet said, "Mother, do not weep and shed such bitter tears and be so ashamed. Had you not sent me to the jungle for fourteen years, I would not have known what a virtuous woman Sita is and how devoted Lakshmana is to me, and what a true brother Bharata is."

Once again all was joy and peace at Ajodhya. Ramchandra ruled the kingdom more successfully than his predecessors, but for Sita there was more trouble in store. When she looked pale and felt languid, Rama asked her if she wished for any particular pleasure before the arrival of the comet.

"I should like to visit the forest (*topoban*)" she replied, and this was promised. All the preparations were made for Ramchandra to accompany Sita to the hermitage when he heard whispers against Sita, because she had lived in the palace of Ravana. This so troubled him that he weighed his love against duty as a king, and his state stood before his wife. Ramchandra was very sad about it and decided to send Sita away and thus desert her. They all noticed that Ramchandra was in trouble but he was silent, so no one knew the cause of it till the day of her departure. "I know she is innocent," he said to Lakshmana and I love her but my duty to my subjects comes before and I must sacrifice myself for them and send my Sita away. You must take her to the forest." Lakshmana was greatly shocked as this proposal was most unexpected and unwelcome news and he begged Rama to excuse him and said, "My lord, my master, how could you command me to perform such a cruel deed, to leave mother Sita in her delicate condition in a jungle? What would the world think of me and what would your people say?" But Rama spoke to him kindly and said, "there is no other but you, who could carry out my wishes and whom I trust. Take Sita to the jungle and help me to do my duty to my subjects." It wrung the heart of Lakshmana and he was silent. Lakshmana with a sad heart promised to obey his brother and master and on the appointed day came to Sita to accompany her to the *topoban*. Sita was surprised at not being accompanied by her husband but understood that his absence was due to the heavy demand on his time in connection with the affairs of his state. Lakshmana drove carefully but in silence. Sita enjoyed the peaceful scenery but her thoughts

recognised their monarch's fatherhood. When the drama was finished Rama turning to the wise Valmiki said with a deep sigh "would that my wife were here, but I fear she will never consent to a second trial of her honour, for worthy sir, though she was proved by fire in our presence, the people of Ajodhya did not believe in her. If she does not win the confidence of my subjects I regret I have not the power to take her back. Sir, I am most anxious to have my Sita as my queen on this throne and have my sons near me. Kind sir, persuade her to return." Valmiki's experience enabled him to gauge and he understood that Rama had suffered intensely for the sacrifice he had made. He longed to bring about a reconciliation, so he promised to speak to Sita.

XII

When Valmiki interviewed the exiled queen, he discovered it was no easy task he had undertaken, for Sita wished for no reconciliation. She acknowledged her husband as her God, to worship and adore, but what she now sought was peace and rest. His pleadings however, succeeded, for her sons were a great consideration, so Sita decided to go to Ajodhya. On the fixed day, with tears, sad tears, she said goodbye to Valmiki, Mooni's wife and thanked her for all her kindness during her stay there.

Sita left the *topoban* with the old sage and her beloved sons. Sita was fatigued after her long journey from the *topoban* and arrived at Ajodhya. Sita gently walked into the *darbar* where Ramchandra was anxiously waiting for her. In Ramchandra's presence, with downcast eyes, looking calmly modest and chaste, with the eyes of the crowd full upon her stood Sita. Ramchandra knew her well, and longed to have her in his arms but the people of Ajodhya stood between them.

Valmiki spoke to Sita, "Dear daughter, free these people from doubt and let them see what a virtuous woman you are in the presence of your husband the King. Prove my dear child of your true love for your husband and take your position as the queen and mother of your children of Ajodhya." Sita shrank, yet with a voice full of pathetic determination she said 'I am true in thought and deed

PROMILA

It was when Ramchandra reigned that there lived in the south of India where Ceylon is now, a Maharajah of *Danab* race, named Ravana. He had several sons and all were brave, but the eldest was the bravest and most handsome of them all. He had met Indra, the king of *devas*, in single combat, and long and fiercely they had fought, till the *Rakshasa* defeated the god Indra. That was the reason he was called Indrajit, the Conqueror of Indra.

Thus, through his son's valour, Ravana became a still more powerful king and people trembled at his name, and his capital was famed for its strength and riches.

Indrajit had been married to a fair and gentle princess. Promila was her name, and she was the daughter of a *Danab* Maharajah of the same race as Ravana. She was a beautiful girl, and she loved her husband with all her heart and soul, and he returned her love with every fibre of his being.

Indrajit, with his Promila, went to his garden-house, by the sea, and here they wandered in the sylvan glades, and all their days were one long-continued happy dream. Indrajit drank the nectar of love from Promila's lips, and for her the world was Indrajit. Thus the gladsome days slipped past and they knew not what was happening in the world of strife and woe.

On the north of the island, beyond the narrow sea, stretched the great land of India, and travellers and traders brought tales from there of kings and courts. And thus King Ravana heard of the beauteous Sita, daughter of the saintly Janak, King of Mithila, and how, in the great *darbar*, Rama, the Crown Prince of Ajodhya, had broken Janak's magic bow and won the peerless Princess for his bride.

The glowing accounts of Sita's loveliness inflamed the *Rakshasa's* heart, and often Ravana brooded as to how he might obtain possession of her. Then

a strange story reached his Court. When the coronation of Rama was near at hand, on the abdication of his father, Dasaratha's second and favourite queen had claimed a long since offered boon and caused the monarch to banish his eldest son, Rama, for fourteen years, and to place the jealous queen's son, Bharata, on the throne. Rama, accompanied by his faithful wife, Sita, and his devoted brother, Lakshmana, departed to the Vindhyas Giri, to spend his exile there.

One day, when the three royal hermits were living on the banks of the Godavari river, and Rama and Lakshmana were out hunting, Ravana came and carried Sita away to Lanka (Ceylon).

So Rama waged war upon the *Rakshasa* King, to rescue Sita the beautiful, and, being half divine, he endowed legions of monkeys with human attributes, and, with their aid, bridged the narrow sea and besieged Lanka. All Ravana's sons fell, in defence of their country, including the giant Bhiraboo. And the king, who had been loath to disturb Indrajit in his well earned rest, now felt the need of his heir's valiant sword. But he could find no messenger to bear the tidings of woe, for each and all feared that the Prince would disbelieve the tale of disaster and, deeming that the messenger jested, would punish him, perhaps with death!

At last, some one remembered Indrajit's old nurse and she declared her willingness to go. She was aged and bent, and hobbled painfully along, leaning heavily upon her stick, and, when she reached the Palace gates, she sank upon the grass to rest.

Indrajit's pleasure house was built to perfection and by his own planning. On entering the garden one felt that it was not of this earth; hut was Paradise. Flowers bloomed there all the year round and fruits of various kinds hung on the trees, and birds sang sweetly. Indrajit and Promila often rowed upon a canal, which entered the sea, and afterwards they wandered in their garden, where stood an old temple. Here, often, Promila prayed. She used to decorate the altar with flowers of glowing hues, and, whenever Indrajit found her there, his heart was full of gladness, for he knew she prayed for him and all her prayer was, "Mother Parvati take care of my beloved."

The morning sun was brightening all the earth and the Prince and Princess

were just leaving the temple, when a maid came, and said to Promila "The *Raj Kumar's* old nurse has come, and sits beside the gate and weeps "

Indrajit and Promila went out to welcome the aged dame and bring her in, and found her rocking to and fro in grief and asked her, tenderly, the reason of her tears

She touched their feet, and sobbed "My boy, my child! the news is sad! How shall I tell you?"

Indrajit immediately asked, with keen anxiety, "My dear parents are they not well?"

"They are in perfect health, my son," and still she wept

"What is it, then?" implored the Prince "What is the news you bring? Tell me, dear nurse"

"Your brother, Birbahoo, is dead," she wailed

"Dead! my brother Birbahoo! What ailed him?" cried Indrajit

The old nurse then summoned courage to tell all the terrible tale Indrajit listened, at first in stupefied surprise Then, as the magnitude of the disaster dawned upon him, his aspect became dreadful, and he cried aloud "My brother dead! Birbahoo, the mighty, slain by Rama! My parents bent with sorrow! And I enjoy this peaceful life!"

For a space, he lost himself in mournful reverie Then, throwing up his head, as if he would confront the whole Creation, and with the glint of battle making fire in his eyes, he cried "Am I not Indrajit? I shall avenge them Go back, my faithful nurse, and tell my King and father that I hasten with my sword, and Rama and Lakshmana shall account to me for all they have done Tender my reverent salutations to my Queen mother Her Indrajit will now be to her as a hundred sons Farewell, dear nurse, I go to prepare me for the field" And Indrajit sped swiftly to his palace

Promila soothed and comforted the old and cherished servant, giving her messages of sympathy to her bereaved parents in law Then she sought her husband, and found him about to huckle on his sword

"That duty is mine!" she cried, and, springing to his side, she girded him

for war, and as she did so she said "Husband and lord! I know your duty to King, country and parents comes before all else, and I shall not hinder you but may I not accompany you to the Capital?"

"Promila! beloved wife, music of my life!" and Indrajit caught her in a mighty clasp of farewell love "Is it possible I could forget you for a single moment? You are my higher soul, the sunshine of my life! Wait here awhile for me I go to slay Rama and Lakshmana, as they have slain my brothers but I shall return this evening Fear not, my little wife!"

Promila kissed his hands and feet, in wifely love and reverence, and cried "Your word is my law In all the world, there does not live a more proud and happy wife than I So, my prince, my King, I shall watch for you this evening to see you return victorious"

"Was ever wife like mine!" cried Indrajit, and held her to his heart awhile then hastened away, mounted his great war horse and rode forth at full speed

Promila watched him out of sight, and then a shade of sadness crossed her face and a sigh escaped her lips Her maidens gathered round her, with hopeful words They had admiringly watched her brave, bright face, as she leaned out of the window and waved a last farewell

"Do not fret now, do not be unhappy," they said, "You have been so calm, so brave, so truly a soldier's wife, and the Prince will soon return No one can conquer Indrajit"

The Princess wandered to her garden It seemed strangely deserted All the brightness and joy were gone The canal was no longer the same sunlit stream The flowers had lost their charm The birds sang out of tune Indrajit was gone, and without him, life became a void, a pathless chasm, into which she could not see The long hours spun their weary length, and, as each waned and passed, her soul grew heavier

The evening shades gathered, and still no Indrajit came Then Promila spoke to those around her "Night is falling, and where is my husband? Can no one seek him?" and as the shadows deepened, she said "I fear for him" And then again "I cannot stay here without my lord"

Her ladies tried to console her, and said "Be patient, beloved Princess! No one can harm the *Rajkumar*. Is he not Indrajit?"

Promila waved aside their consolations. "I am going to him," she cried, with sudden fire. "Who comes with me?"

"Princess, Princess," they exclaimed, "you cannot go! The great gate will be closed. The enemy's camp is just below the city walls. You could not pass."

Promila's mind was set, and her plan was formed. She answered calmly, "No gates can hold me back, no enemy intimidate me. I go to join my lord. Who follows?"

The maidens gazed aghast. They knew not how to answer her. Admiration and alarm held them dumb. Then the Princess gave her commands. 'Now, those who come with me, prepare. Don armour, and carry swords and spears and shields, and order out the chargers. I go to meet my lord, the Prince.'

Carried away by the energy of her words, the maidens hastened to obey, and soon a troop of them rode out, all beautiful and clad in armour. A goodly sight! The horses seemed to know the precious freight they bore, and proudly held their heads as they galloped forth. The Princess led, dressed as a knight, with her richly chased gold scabbard swinging at her side, a bow with an ancient quiver, full of arrows, slung across her left shoulder and the sword in her right hand. Her silken platts fell down upon each side, upon her glittering armour, and her face was alight and eager, as she cried, "Now, for Lanka and my lord!"

It was near midnight, and all the island slept. Only the watchful guards, in tent and city, were awake. They heard the thud of horses' hoofs breaking upon the still night air, and wondered.

The maiden troop drew near the enemy's camp, and Promila chose her messengers and sent them forward. But Hanuman, Rama's faithful ally, challenged them, and, when they sought to pass, he said, "We know the *Rakshasa* art is famous at disguise! You shall not pass."



Then the Lady Basanti replied : "Sir Monkey, we bear a message to the great Rama, your master, from the Crown Princess of Lanka, and it admits of no delay."

Hanuman hastened to his King, and soon returned to conduct the messengers to the royal presence. Rama, received them graciously, and the girls were impressed with the gentleness of his personality. The Lady Basanti informed him that their Princess wished to join her husband, and desired leave to enter the besieged Capital. "And," she added, spiritedly, "if we are not freely permitted to do so, we are ready to fight our way in."

Rama answered : "Fair maidens, I have no wish to fight any one, least of all a devoted wife. Carry my homage to your Princess, and tell her she and her escort may pass."

Captivated by his chivalrous bearing and the majesty of his face, the two maidens knelt at the feet of Rama and begged his blessing ere they returned to the Princess.

Their mistress was well pleased when she heard that they could freely pass. She gave her escort the order to advance, and the maiden-troop rode forward through the *deva* camp. Rama, Lakshmana and all their army stood in silence to watch the strange procession pass. All the fair riders were beautiful, but, surpassing all, was the radiant loveliness of Princess Promila. Her proud bearing, her lily-like face, the sparkle and courage of her large, black eyes, the determination of her dainty mouth, made her a wonderful picture. In her little right hand, she carried a drawn sword, and, as she passed Prince Rama and he joined his hands in homage to her, she raised her sword in salutation. All who watched the triumphant progress of Promila thought it a privileged sight and that they had never beheld anyone so dazzlingly beautiful as the Crown Princess was that night, and they likened her to a moon, surrounded by a court of stars.

Thus Promila and her maidens rode unharmed through their enemy's camp and reached the gates of Lanka. The draw-bridge was lowered, and the troops within the walls hailed Promila with shouts of joy and admiration. The news that the Crown Princess was about to enter the city had been despatched to the

Palace, and, when Promila stayed her horse in the royal court yard, her husband stood there to greet her, his face suffused with glad surprise and admiring love.

"I could not rest without you," she murmured, and he answered "Oh, I am happy that you have come. You are the inspiration of my life. My beloved," he said, "I am going to fight Rama and Lakshmana to-morrow, and was coming to you as a conqueror."

"Oh, my lord, my husband," cried Promila, "I dread this fighting, and how I wish there were no battle fields in the world!"

Indrajit answered lovingly "Promila, my sweet wife, be brave, do not forget that you are a soldier's wife, and that the soldier defeated Indra, himself. Besides, I am going to worship our family god, *Agni* (Fire) in the secret temple, before I fight, and I am sure that, with his blessing, I shall stand by you as a conqueror to-morrow."

Early next morning, he awakened Promila, saying "Rise, my wife, see, the sun is tinting everything with his golden beams. It is a day of promise. Hasten dear love, and help me dress. Let your Indrajit carry with him the light of your eyes."

Promila sprang from her couch, and, as she assisted him, smiles dimpled her cheeks and the music of her voice filled his ears. No sadness marred the joy of this their last hour together. If either felt a pang of sorrow, or dreaded ill, the thought was quickly dispelled, so as not to sadden the other.

Then they went to the Palace, to see Indrajit's mother, and to ask her blessing. The Queen awaited them. Her face was pale and worn with grief for her slain sons, and now Indrajit, her first born, the glory of their house, stood before her, all ready to go and she must bless him. The anguish of her mother love and fear almost stayed the pulsing of her heart. But for his sake, she must be brave, so her eyes alone showed the travail of her soul.

Indrajit and Promila touched her feet, in filial obeisance, and, with tender affection, she kissed them both on their foreheads. Then she spoke to Indrajit, in a calm and controlled voice, and said "My son, I feel confident that you will return victorious, for are you not the conqueror of Indra, Lord of Heaven?"

Oh, I am the proudest mother of all on earth I bless you, my first born, my precious son, with all my heart "

Then, looking at Promila, she cried "*Bohu*, you are a lucky wife ! Turn your eyes upon my son Is he not a true warrior ? Oh, be not sad, little daughter, for in pride and victory he will return, and meantime you shall stay with me, and we shall weave the garlands to adorn our hero this evening "

Indrajit once more touched his mother's feet, then said farewell to Promila, who knelt before him, and then the hero hastened to the temple As he walked swiftly through the Palace garden, he heard light footsteps following him, and, turning back, saw Promila He opened wide his arms, and she flew into them, like a bird to its nest, and was lost in his embrace

"My beautiful, my queen !" he murmured, and stroked her silky hair

"My great and brave soldier, I have no fears for you !" she whispered, "but I wanted just to look into your eyes, once more " And then her courage failed her A sudden wave of apprehension swept over her, and she hid her face upon his breast and wept

Indrajit held her trembling form closely to him for a while and then, raising her flower-like face with both his hands, he gazed deep into her eyes, and said "Little wife, these eyes of yours are too lovely for tears ! Smile on me ! I am a conqueror in battle, but a prisoner here, chained with the golden fetters of your love, I am weak Strengthen me with smiles, and let me go to win fresh laurels "

A blush spread over Promila's tear stained face and a smile irradiated her dewy eyes, and Indrajit thought she had never looked more beautiful

"Oh, my Prince, my master," she said, "light and hope of my life, I shall not be an obstacle in your way, but I shall anxiously await your return," and so they parted

After leaving Indrajit, Promila prayed to Goddess Parvati to take care of him, but a gust of wind scattered her words and so her prayer never reached Heaven

Indrajit went into the temple to worship *Agni* (God of Fire) Crowned with the *jaimala*, and decked with garlands, he looked like a god himself, but he bore

no arms nor weapons, for he came there to pray As he knelt before the altar, Bibhisan, his uncle, treacherously admitted Lakshmana through the secret tunnel, for Lakshmana feared for his brother, Rama, in the combat with the great Indrajit

The *Rakshasa Prince*, praying there, opened his eyes and saw Lakshmana, and, believing him to be the god *Agni*, raised his clasped hands and said aloud "Oh, *Agni Dev*, you have come to me, ere I go to battle Bless me, that I may slay Rama and Lakshmana in vengeance for my brothers' blood! But, oh, kind god, why do you come in the form of my enemy, Lakshmana "

In a voice of rage and hatred, which filled the temple like thunder, Lakshmana answered "Open wide your eyes, and see! I am not God *Agni*, I am Lakshmana, great Rama's brother, and I come to take your life "

Indrajit, believing that the god tried him, in some mysterious way, answered reverently "Oh, God, why do you try me, thus? Enlighten me, I pray "

The angry voice again replied "I am not God *Agni* I am Lakshmana "

Indrajit asked, wonderingly, "If you are truly Lakshmana, as you say, how came you to the temple from behind the altar? None but our Raj family know that entrance Nay, nay, you are God *Agni*, and test my faith "

Lakshmana answered impatiently "I am not going to say how I came Enough that I am here, and seek your life "

Indrajit now rose to his feet, and said "Since you are really my enemy, and wish to fight, let me get my sword Here, I stand unarmed, and a temple is not the place wherein to fight "

"Be you armed or not," shouted Lakshmana, "what care I? When one finds a tiger in a net, is mercy shown it? Your life I seek, and shall have it at all costs "

"Lakshmana," said Indrajit, "I am ashamed of you Men call you a Kshatriya, but you disgrace the name when you force fight upon an unarmed man "

Lakshmana's only answer to this just and grave reproof was a furious attack and Indrajit was obliged to defend himself with the altar ornaments. Lakshmana, stunned by a blow, fell senseless to the floor, and Indrajit, taking advantage of the lull, walked to the door, to see how his enemy had got in. There, to his horror, he found his disloyal uncle, Bihhisan.

"Now I know how Lakshmana entered here!" exclaimed Indrajit. "Oh, uncle! Whatever my father did, he is your king, and your flesh and blood. Have you forgotten your mother, and every tie of kith and kin? Open the door, and let me hence, I beg."

But Bihhisan held the door, and Indrajit added, scornfully, "I am not going to run away. I only wish to get my sword. Do you know that Lakshmana would fight me unarmed?"

"Nephew," answered Bihhisan, coldly, "I am now in Rama's service. I came with Lakshmana, his brother, and must obey him. He bid me hold the door."

"You, a servant of Rama!" replied Indrajit, in amazed disgust, but he could say no more, for Lakshmana, who had meantime regained consciousness, had taken up his bow and shot an arrow at his enemy with fatal accuracy. Indrajit fell to the floor and lay in a pool of blood. He gasped, "I am dying. I shall soon be gone, but Lakshmana, beware. When my father, the king of Lanka, hears of my death, and how unjustly you have killed an unarmed man, the fire of his rage will be double, and nobody on this earth will be able to save you. You may try to hide in the midst of a crowd, or in the deep ocean, but King Ravana's anger will follow you wherever you go."

Then, looking at his uncle, he said, "Uncle Bihhisan, it is shameful that you, the brother of Ravana, could serve an ordinary being like Ramachandra and be a spy for him, and thus come to kill a nephew whom once you loved."

He closed his eyes, and spoke again, "Dear father and mother, who are waiting for my return from the temple, I shall never return. I ask for your blessing." Then, in an anguished voice, he cried out, "Promila, Promila, what will you do without me? I promised you I would return safely to you."

Promila, my beloved, if I could but see you once again ! Pray to Parvati Devi that we may meet again soon "

Without the temple, the *Rakshasa* host stood ready for battle, awaiting their leader, and, when time passed and still he tarried, some ventured in, to remind him of the hour. They entered and searched the now disordered temple, and found Indrajit lying dead behind the altar and the door to the secret passage standing open. With beating hearts and trembling limbs, they carried the dread news to King Ravana. At first, the monarch refused to believe them. Could it be possible for Indrajit to be killed, unarmed, while praying to God *Agni* in the temple ? But the silent flower garlanded body of his beloved son, and the strewn ornaments of the altar, spoke only too truly of the ghastly tragedy.

All the high hopes of the *Rakshasas* were dashed to the ground, and mourning filled every heart. Ravana sent out a flag of truce to Rama asking for a day's grace, in order to perform the obsequies, which Rama granted, expressing sympathy for King Ravana's heavy loss.

In the palace of Lanka, all was desolation. Promila had signified her desire to accompany her lord in his fiery journey to the realms beyond death, and none dared stay her. Promila went to bid her mother-in-law farewell, and found her prostrated with grief on the floor. When Promila cried out to her "Mother, bless me !" the Maharani Mandodari wept, and said "How can you leave me ?"

Promila replied "Mother, the world is blank to me, for my husband was all in all to me, and I have no children to live for. My husband was all my joy and happiness, and you always wished me to be near him. Now send me to him to-day, saying, as you always did, 'never leave him' ". Then Promila touched her mother-in-law's feet, and left her.

The body of the cruelly murdered *Rakshasa* hero was placed in a State palanquin and Promila dressed in her bridal robes and adorned with jewels and garlanded with flowers, took her seat within at the still, cold feet of her beloved. The Princess looked an angel of beauty. Her sweet face was transformed, and her eyes shone with an unearthly light.

The ladies in waiting formed a guard-of-honour round the palanquin. They

were mounted on noble chargers and dressed in armour, as they had been on the previous night, when they accompanied the Crown Princess to Lanka, but their faces were now sad, and they looked like stars in a misty sky.

The superb black horse, on which Promila had ridden so bravely in that triumphant procession through the *deva* camp, was led at the head of the mournful cortege. Promila's suit of armour, sword, bow and quiver of arrows, rested upon the empty saddle, and the noble animal walked with head bent, as if he mourned having no rider and knew the journey upon which she was bound.

When the procession reached the sea shore, the body of the dead warrior was placed upon the pyre, and the Princess walked with a proud and steady step to the front of the hier and paid her last homage to her husband. Then, returning she knelt at King Ravana's feet, and said: "Father, give me permission to go with him for whose happiness you chose me and brought me to your home."

Ravana answered, in a broken voice: "Oh, Promila, my child, I had always looked forward to the day when Indrajit and you would sit on the throne of Lanka. Have I lived all these years to see this awful day? What is Lanka without my son?" Then he cried aloud, in grief: "Oh, Indrajit, Indrajit, why were you taken from me?"

Promila gently touched his feet again and, rising, walked to her maidens, who were all weeping bitterly. The Princess distributed her jewels among them, saying tender words of farewell to each. Most of them had accompanied her from her father's home, when she came as a bride to Lanka, and all loved her. She came to the Lady Basanti last of all and, embracing her, said: "Basanti, go home and tell all there, who loved me and played with me in childhood, that I always loved them, and tell my dear mother," here Promila's voice broke and she paused awhile, then went on bravely, "tell my mother I am gone with him for whom I left my parents. Tell my dear father and mother that I have been most happy with my husband. I cannot live without him."

Then, taking off her last, and most valuable pair of bracelets, she clasped them on Basanti's wrists and embraced her once again and then turned towards

the pyre Her steps were slow and gentle Her face was sad, but in her eyes shone the same mysterious light, and she held herself with graceful strength and dignity and looked forward expectantly as she walked towards the bier All hushed their breath and watched her The murmur of the sea alone broke the stillness

Now the Princess was near the funeral pyre, and, with bent head and slow, solemn step, she circled it seven times, and as she did so, her lips moved in prayer Then she ascended the steps and touched her head to the cold, still feet of him she loved and, seating herself at the head of the bier, she gently and reverently raised the dear head and placed it in her lap and sat with her head bent over the face of the Prince And, as the flames rose, the priests began to chant, and Ravana the King prostrated himself with grief, crying "Oh, *Agni*, great God! My *Indrajit*! My little pearl, *Promila*!"

Thus, encircled in living flames of fire, the bodies of the Crown Prince and Princess of Lanka passed from mortal sight, and the pure soul of *Promila* rose to God, while the great ocean sang her requiem And ever since, the spot is holy ground, and King Ravana raised in haste a costly cenotaph, and, near to it, a temple

DAMAYANTI

I

Far back in the golden ages of India, Bhimsen, a great and powerful Maharajah, reigned over the rich kingdom of Bidarva, North-West of India. The poor and oppressed never sought his gates in vain and the land rang with his praises. Yet with all this the Maharajah was not happy. A crumpled leaf lay in his bed of roses, and whichever way he turned he felt it, for no child had come to bless his manhood and his whole being yearned for the joy of hearing the name of father fall from baby lips.

The years sped on and Bhimsen's face grew sad and sadder, and at last all Bidarva knew that some trouble preyed upon their King's mind. Their wonderings and conjectures may have reached the ears of a holy hermit named Damana. This *rishi* visited one day at the kingdom and long and earnest were the conversations which the King and this sage held together. Damana was surprised and pleased to find that all the praise bestowed on Bhimsen by his adoring subjects was well deserved. He noticed that the Maharajah was ever ready to hear his people's cries, and that none cried in vain. Daily he witnessed large sums of money being distributed to relieve suffering, sickness and want. Yet trouble was shown on the King's brow and it furrowed every feature of his face. The *rishi* determined to console his sorrow. "Maharajah ji," he asked earnestly one evening as they sat in the garden under the stars, "What ails you? Tell me the cause of your sorrow."

"Revered Sir, Great and Kind Mooni," the Maharajah replied, with clasped hands, "my only trouble is that I am childless and the people want an heir."

On hearing this the *moonis* asked the Maharajah to have a big Yagna and many holy men came to it and they all prayed for the welfare of the Maharajah. When it was over, Damana Mooni said, "King and friend, despair not, grieve

no longer, since prayers are always heard and the mercy of God grants them. Seeing you so good, so noble, I have prayed for you that the desire of your heart shall be granted. My prayer has won its way to the throne of grace."

"Oh, *Rishibar*, I thank you for all you have said. May I with your blessings soon be the happiest man to be a father. May God grant our prayers," replied the King joyfully, his voice deep with gratitude and he rose from his seat and led the way to the Palace courtyard.

Before the year had run its course there were great rejoicings in Bidarva, for the Queen had given birth to a daughter, and in gratitude to the *Rishi* Damana for his prayers she was named Damayanti after him. Bhishma's days were now one golden dream of joy and he spared nothing in his care and education of his lovely child who grew up as clever and sweet as she was beautiful. As she ripened into maidenhood all Bharatvarsa heard of her wondrous charm and beauty and there was not an old or young Maharajah in the land who did not hope to win Bidarva's fair daughter when the time for her marriage came. Even four gods, *Indra*, the King of Heaven, *Agni*, the God of Fire, *Yama*, the Lord of Justice, and *Varuna*, the Ruler of the Seas, were among her admirers and resolved to be suitors for her hand.

Nal, son of Birsan, adored by his subjects and honoured by all who knew him—his people were most anxious to see him with a suitable bride to complete his happiness. The fame of Bidarva's Princess reached his court, and he listened, with his heart beating strangely, to the ever increasing tales of her wondrous beauty. The name Damayanti became sweetest music to him. He slept but to dream of her who owned it, and wakened again just to hear her praises. The burden and cares of State oppressed him. "Damayanti, Damayanti," sang his impatient heart, "How shall I make known to her my love?"

One day he walked by the winding lake in his Palace gardens planning and thinking, and as he walked to and fro his eyes fell on the stately swans that floated there amid the lotuses, and he remembered that these swans of his had been trained to carry letters and that more trustworthy messengers could not be

found. So he wrote and put a letter in the beak of one of the birds, telling Damayanti of his love.

Damayanti heard the praise of the great Nal in Bidarva from one and all. The fair Princess secretly gave her young heart to the ruler of Nishad, without his knowing anything about it.

One evening she wandered in the garden with some of her friends and all their talk was of Maharajah Nal and his knightly deeds. A dreamy expression came into Damayanti's sweet face and her glorious eyes were full of yearning. Her companions remarked it and whispered among themselves. As they neared the lake they noticed a magnificent swan swimming towards the steps. Some of the girls ran down to the water's edge to see it. To their surprise it seemed frightened of them and began to swim quickly away. When they retreated it returned and when they again advanced to the *ghat* it again swam rapidly away. The Princess's curiosity was awakened and she said to her companions: "All of you wait here. I will go and see what it is."

With nimble grace she sped to the edge of the lake and down the steps and the beautiful swan immediately swam swiftly to her and bowing its slender and graceful neck dropped something at her feet. Damayanti stooped and picked it up with a strange thrill at her heart. It was Nal's message of love. The tender rays of the setting sun kissed her blushing face as she bent over the letter, and when her attendants surrounded her they guessed her secret. Damayanti stood lost in love's dream-land until one of her companions came near and said that the swan waited. Then she raised her eyes from the letter and the loveliest smile illuminated her face. "We know, we have guessed," laughed her friends. "It is Nal, the Maharajah, who has written to you and you love him, Oh lucky Princess."

The Princess acknowledged that they had guessed right and begged them to help her and they all faithfully promised they would. Then Damayanti began to answer her wonderful love-letter but it took her some time to frame a reply which pleased her. When it was ready she herself placed it in the swan's beak and watched the stately bird sail proudly down the waters of the lake. A stream

connected the waters of Nishad and Bidarva, and the swim travelled up and down bearing letters from Nal to Damayanti and from Damayanti to Nal.

At last one of Damayanti's girl attendants told the Queen (Maharajam) that Damayanti and Nal loved each other, and the Maharajam immediately told her husband. Bhimsen was delighted to hear that his daughter had given her heart to one so worthy, and he lost no time in proclaiming a *Saayambara*.

Maharajah Nal, attired in his best and looking his handsomest and happiest, was going towards Bidarva when he met the four gods *Indra*, *Igm*, *Yom* and *Baruna* travelling in the same direction. He reverently saluted the gods, wondering carelessly what had brought them thus to earth. The gods returned his greeting and all asked as if with one voice where he was going.

He replied proudly, 'To the *Saayambara* to win and wed Bidarva's Princess, Damayanti.

What was his surprise when *Indra* answered, "Well, brave Nal first carry a message to the Princess herself for us. Tell her that we four gods have heard of her beauty and are each anxious to marry her and that we are attending her *Saayambara*, and if she will choose one of us she will be a very happy wife and become a goddess."

Poor Nal, his heart fell at these words. Gods competing, what chance had he. But a way of escape from hearing their message seemed possible.

"It is hardly likely that I should succeed in gaining admittance to the *antapur*," he said in reply.

"Oh," answered all four gods cheerfully, "have no fear about that. We will disguise you and you will get in quite easily."

Nal, though inwardly distressed, submitted to the disguise. His hopes of winning Damayanti, when these gods were his rivals, had diminished, but he would have one first and last look at the face he had so often pictured. He therefore listened attentively to their instructions and then continued his way to the Palace of Bidarva. When he reached his destination he soon found his way to the *antapur* and the Princess's apartment unnoticed by any one. Her bridal dress lay ready upon a couch and her maids braided her hair. As Nal

slipped into the room he caught a mirrored reflection of her enchanting beauty and stealing softly into a corner he feasted his eyes on her wondrous loveliness. It was all and more than he had ever pictured. No *pari* (angel) could be fairer. No wonder these gods had descended to earth to wed her.

Her attendants, all in gay attire, stood around and when the hair dressing was completed they exclaimed admiringly. "Our beloved Princess you look exquisitely beautiful to night. The Maharajah Nal will be blinded by your charms, lucky Nal." The sound of his name roused the hidden messenger from his dream of admiration and stepping forward, he said. "Fair Princess, I am the bearer of a message from the four gods, *Indra*, *Agni*, *Yom* and *Baruna*. They are suitors for your hand and desire you to choose one of them."

The Princess started in alarm at hearing a man's voice in her room, but the respectful hearing of the unknown one reassured her, and she listened quietly to his speech. As she did so his handsome face thrilled her, and her heart whispered within her, "Would that he were Nal."

The disguised Maharajah had not long to wait for her answer, and when the silver notes of her gentle voice floated through the room they filled his heart with joy. "Stranger, I know not who you are but it is not a pleasant message that you have brought me. This is the answer I wish you to convey back for me. I thank the great and kind gods for the honour they have paid me and I am proud of it, but my heart and soul are given to the Maharajah Nal and I shall wed none but him."

"Gods are gods, fair lady," answered the secretly-overjoyed Nal, while all the maidens wondered at the radiance which illuminated his face and the love-light which leaped into his eyes. "Nal though a great Maharajah is after all even at his best just an ordinary human being."

"I would rather be Nal's wife than anyone's for my love is given to him," Damayanti replied very sweetly and very determinedly, and Nal's heart beat rapidly at her words. "Whether I wed Nal or not, my love for him is true and I am his and his alone. Kind Messenger, please bear my answer back to the gods."

Nal could not speak for joy and bowing low in homage before her he turned to leave the room but ere he reached the door a sudden impulse compelled the Princess to ask "Won't you tell me who you are? "

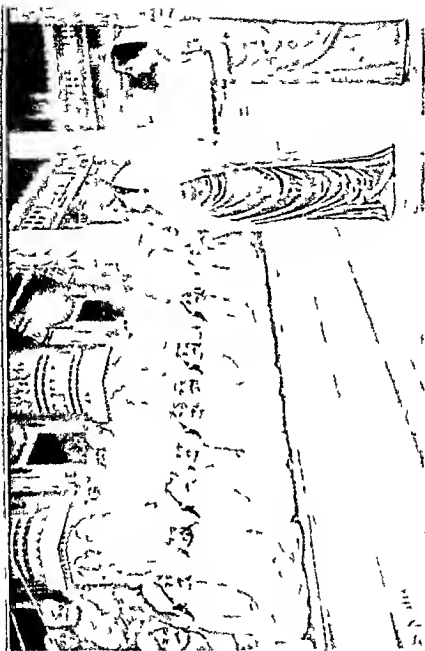
"I am Nal," he answered softly and sped swiftly from the *zenana*. Damayanti closed her eyes in ecstasy, murmuring softly "My prayers are heard, he is Nal, my Nal "

The four gods were waiting his return and listened eagerly for the answer he had brought them. Disappointed, but still hopeful, each declared he would test Damayanti's love for Nal by going to the *Swayambara* disguised as another Nal. Once again the Maharajah's heart trembled, but this time for Damayanti as well as for himself.

The great *darbar* of Bidarva was crowded with suitors. Many maharajahs, princes and nobles assembled for Bhimsen's lovely daughter, Damayanti, in her bridal attire and attended by a bevy of young and fair maids of honour, one of whom carried a long garland of scented flowers, walked along the lines of expectant gallants, listening with gentle dignity and patience to the praises of each, and then passing silently on. Presently she suddenly stopped and her girlish figure trembled as if with fear. The dainty blushes faded from her cheeks leaving her face colourless, and her sweet lips drooped with sorrow. Everyone in the assembly held his breath and wondered what the Princess would do, for five Nals sat side by side, as like each other as they could be. And, like a lifeless statue, the Princess stood before them. Which was he, her Nal?

The heart of the real Nal swelled with pitying love that she should be in so sore a state and he powerless to her. But as she stood there Damayanti prayed "God of Love Guide me aright in my choice. If my love for Nal be pure and true, direct me, help me to know him." Then taking the garland in her own hand, she bravely raised her eyes. Four of the Nals sat straight upright, looking calmly at her, but the fifth kept his eyes fixed on the floor, so she knew at once this was the Nal, King of her heart.

The four gods were generously delighted at her keen perception and assisted at the wedding and blessed the happy pair with rich blessings. But as they



journeyed back to heaven they overtook *Sani* and he was wroth to hear that an ordinary man had been preferred by a maiden to a god, and vowed to avenge the insult. The wedding festivities over, *Damayanti* accompanied her husband to his home, and all *Nishad* welcomed her with joy. Several happy years passed away and two children came to complete their joy, a son, *Indrasen*, and his sister, *Indrasena*. But the sight of their happiness did not change *Sani's* purpose. Nothing could make him forget the insult the gods had had in the rejection of the four by *Damayanti*.

So he became friendly with *Nal's* younger brother, *Pushkar*, and often visited him but always invisibly. *Pushkar* alone could see or hear him. At first *Sani* led *Pushkar* to talk about his brother, then he began to whisper insinuations in the young Prince's ear. Now the Maharajah was free from vice of any kind and his soul pure, and at first *Pushkar* was indignant to hear any doubts of his elder brother but by degrees the poison worked and finally he came to believe that *Nal* was not a saint and it only needed an opportunity to reveal his weakness. At last, tutored by *Sani*, *Pushkar* brought some dice to the palace and proposed to his brother that they should amuse themselves by throwing them. The Maharajah carelessly assented, and by degrees the fatal passion took possession of his mind, and one after another he staked all he had, money, jewels and kingdom and lost all.

"You have lost everything save your wife and children," shouted *Pushkar* in a harsh voice, "now you had better stake her."

Nal sprang to his feet in indignation at the rude words, but as he raised his hand to punish the insulter he realised his position, that he was a beggar and beggared by his own hand and the taunter his own victorious brother. Leaving *Pushkar* the ruined Maharajah sought his Queen. When he entered her apartment his troubled face and gloomy eyes betrayed his agitation and before he could speak *Damayanti* stood by his side and asked, "What troubles, my husband and Lord? Tell your *Damayanti*, I implore of you, perhaps she can help."

Giving deep into her loving eyes *Nal* answered sadly, "*Damayanti*, beloved one, I am in terrible trouble. I know not how to tell you of it."

The Queen clasped his hand in hers and caressing it said tenderly : "Tell me, husband beloved, tell me."

"Damayanti," he stammered, "I am ashamed to tell you. I have committed a terrible sin. I have lost all I possess in the world and my brother with his dice has won everything, kingdom and all and is now the Maharajah. Damayanti, my poor Damayanti, you and I are beggars and homeless. What have you to say to your worthless husband?"

Damayanti lovingly stroked her humbled hero's hand and answered brightly "Why, let us go to my father, he has no son and you will be one to him."

"No, no, my wife," replied Nal, "I am a ruined man, I cannot go to my father-in-law, but you may go back to your parents. Yes, you must leave me and wait until I can offer another home for you, and then you will return to me with the children. If ever I get back my State I shall come myself to your father's kingdom to fetch you, but at present the only thing for you to do is to leave me."

Damayanti answered quietly but in a most decided tone : "Nal, I did not marry you for money or position, but for yourself because I loved you. My love for you is unchanged and where you go I follow for I am yours for neal and woe. I will send the children to my mother, but my place is by your side, and nothing will induce me to think otherwise."

Back across the years his memory flew to the *Swayambara* day when she in her fresh girlish beauty had chosen him above all, even the four gods, and this was the return he had made her. He raised his head with renewed hope but sadly pointed out to her the hardness and difficulties of his future life, for he had decided to go to the jungles. Damayanti remained unshaken in her determination to share his altered lot. So the children were sent from Nishad to her parents, and the State, with its beautiful palace and all its treasures, now belonged to his brother Pushkar; then Nal and his devoted wife prepared to leave the home where they had spent so many happy days. Just as they were setting out for the jungle Pushkar's servants stopped Damayanti and said to her:



rudly, "Your jewels and rich clothes belong now to our master, Maharajah Pushkar. You have no right to any of them."

So Damayanti clothed herself in a common, coarse *saree* and went forth without a single possession, but she held Nal's hand in hers and talked brightly and bravely of the simple life they would be able to lead in the forest.

They had been there only a few days when Sani, chuckling over his revenge, came to see how they fared, but he came secretly, hiding himself in a heavy black cloud. One afternoon he saw the exiled king and queen sitting under a tree and they both seemed quite reconciled to their new life and both looked quite happy. He felt furious, for he had hoped to find them miserable and Damayanti regretting that she had chosen Nal for her husband in preference to one of the gods.

As Sani watched them and wondered how he could punish them still further he heard Nal say: "Your wish is my law, Damayanti."

"Ho! Ho!" laughed Sani, "Now is my time," and he immediately changed himself into a golden bird and alighted before the happy pair.

Damayanti exclaimed, "Oh look at that lovely bird," and she was so pleased with it that she begged Nal to catch it, saying, "Do, my dear lord, try to secure it, and we shall sell it for an immense sum of money and we shall be able to buy some food." Nal needed no second bidding and flung the corner of his *dhooti* over the wonderful bird. To his surprise the golden creature flew away from the ground, carrying the garment with it, leaving Nal a picture of distress. "Share my *saree* with me," said Damayanti sweetly and Nal did so, for where in the forest could he get another garment.

Then, laughing merrily over the adventure, Nal looked quite happy dressed up in Damayanti's *anchal* (end of the *saree*). These two loving hearts wandered on, more united and happier than ever. Sani had expected that Nal would curse Damayanti for this fresh misfortune and leave her, and the sight of their increased happiness and devotion angered him still further and he renewed his vow of vengeance. One afternoon, a few days later Damayanti, feeling very tired, rested with her head on her husband's knee. While she slept Nal lovingly

watched her. About sunset a large black cloud appeared in the sky, and from it a voice called : "Nal, leave Damayanti, she is a witch who has charmed you, and until you forsake her, your luck will not mend."

Nal was impressed by the strange voice and wondered whence it came, but looking down into Damayanti's beautiful face he answered "My wife is an angel. I will never leave her." The voice spoke again, much louder and still more urgent "Nal, rise and go. She has bewitched you. Trust me, obey me, go at once."

The voice had a strange power which hypnotised Nal despite all his efforts to withstand its power. For a few minutes Nal forgot where he was, what he was doing and his past. In that still, dark night, the heavy cloud hovering over him, this voice, unknown to him, had influenced him so that Nal with trembling hands, tore the half of the *saree* which he was wearing and Nal felt that he had no strength of his own, that he was drawn by the unknown voice and gently lifting Damayanti's head from his knee, he laid it on a stone. Then he rose slowly to his feet and left her, never once looking back to see if she had awakened.

After Nal had gone Damayanti slept on. When Damayanti woke up she found her husband gone. She opened her eyes to find beneath her head a cold hard stone. Then she sat up and as she did so discovered that half of her *saree* was torn off. Nal was not with her and she gazed around, wondering where he was. Then she rose to her feet, calling him. There came no answer and slowly the knowledge that she was alone forced itself upon her. The forest echoes seemed to be mocking her and saying : "Nal has left, deserted you." She ceased her cries and waited and as she waited she thought : "What can have happened? Some fresh misfortune has befallen him. Nal, the great Nal, my brave husband, cannot really have deserted me."

Poor Damayanti! She knew not what to do. She would not believe for a long time that her husband could leave her alone in the forest, surrounded by wild animals. Damayanti again began to cry and called out to Nal, "My Nal, my lord, come back, I am alone, come back to me. Oh Nal, where are you?"

The deserted Princess waited the whole night, but in vain Nal never appeared. Damayanti realised then that her husband had really left her. She was desperate and cried in anguish. The Princess left the cottage and began to wander in the forest. A few days passed, though exhausted with hunger, thirst and crying, she walked on and on. Suddenly she found her path blocked by a huge python. She shrieked aloud in terror and to her relief a *shikari* dashed out from behind a tree, killed the serpent and then turned to Damayanti. Her wonderful beauty thrilled him and for a space he stood spell bound before her. When he found his voice he asked, "Why does such a lovely maiden wander alone in this wilderness?"

Damayanti answered, "I am in great distress. Brother, can you show me the way out of this jungle and have you seen my husband, Nal?"

The *shikari* answered with a wicked smile, "You have lost your way, fair maiden. My house is near. It and all I have shall be yours. Come with me."

Damayanti proudly drew herself away from him and answered indignantly, "How dare you speak so to me? I am the wife of the Maharajah Nal. If you come near me I shall kill you."

But the *shikari* did not mind and spoke roughly, "If you will not come with me I shall take you by force."

Damayanti repeated in a stern voice, "If you dare touch me I shall avenge myself."

Still the hunter pressed nearer and, kneeling, lifted his bow and pointed an arrow at her to frighten her.

Damayanti raised her hand to stop him, saying, "If I am a virtuous woman, may you stay where you are and may the gods not permit you to move."

Laughing derisively at her words the *shikari* attempted to spring to his feet and then the conviction that he was riveted to the spot, came to him like a thunder bolt. Yet he strove and strove with all his might to rise and while he thus vainly struggled Damayanti disappeared. He found he could not move, that he was paralysed and he had to stay where he was.

The unhappy princess wandered on and presently met a party of merchants who, seeing her in distress, invited her to travel with them. But alas! at night a herd of wild elephants attacked the camp, trampling and goring all to death and Damayanti alone escaped. For a day or two she wandered about in the forest and at last reached its edge. Glad to be out of the jungle she walked rapidly on and came to the gates of a large town. But once again her grief overpowered her and she went on, with her long hair floating in the breeze and great tears streaming down her cheeks, moaning plaintively, "Where is Nal? Where is Nal?"

The street boys thought her mad and threw stones at her, some of which struck and cut her tender limbs, but she walked straight on, unconscious of their taunting cries and blows and her bleeding wounds, and still pursued by the mischievous urchins she reached the palace walls. The Maharani, standing at her window, noticed from afar a woman in a piteous plight and sent an order to the sentries at the gate to rescue her from the cruelty of the boys. To her joy Damayanti learned that this was the Palace of Chedi, for her mother's sister had married the Maharajah of Chedi, but she felt that she would bring further discredit upon her beloved husband if she openly declared herself, so she decided she would contrive to enter the palace and offer her services as a maid servant. Accordingly she asked the guards who had rescued her if the Maharani were in need of a maid. They said no and gazed at her in surprise for she was a strange applicant for service with her long hair hanging dishevelled down to the ground, her *saree* torn and her beauty marred with dust and grief. But her refined manner and gentle pleading showed them she was of high birth and finally they allowed her to enter the palace. She soon found her way to the courtyard of the *antapur* and the waiting women there crowded around her in curiosity and when they understood that she had come hoping to be taken into service they laughed mockingly at her. But she patiently waited until their mirth had spent itself and then gently repeated her request, adding that she wanted no wages, only food and shelter, and pleading that she would do anything asked of her, save scour plates, or touch anyone's food. Her persistence overcame them and

one of the women led her to the Maharani's Head Lady-in-waiting, who said she would give her a trial.

Damayanti performed all the tasks allotted to her with such perfection that every one was pleased with her, and finally she was promoted to be companion to the *Rajkumari* Sunanda and this position brought her into daily contact with the Maharani. But as her *saree* was always drawn over her face and she spoke in a disguised voice her aunt did not recognise her. Both the Maharani and the Princess Sunanda became fond of her and she spent many hours of each day with them. One day the Maharani, in talking to her of her lost niece, Damayanti, said: "I do not know why my beautiful niece ever married that man, Nal. He gambled away all he had, including his kingdom, and then took her away to the jungle. The poor children have not heard anything of their parents since they left."

Damayanti remarked gently, "Perhaps, the poor Maharajah could not help gambling." But the Maharani did not agree to this and said "Ah! if you could only see my niece. She is all that is good and lovely. I wish she had married one of the gods but she preferred this Nal, who has treated her so shamefully."

Poor Damayanti! It hurt her deeply to hear a word against her husband and her tears fell on the flower-garland she was making. The Maharani noticed that she wept and said: "How sympathetic you are! You understand so well how I grieve for my niece. Do you know, child, you often remind me of her, and for that reason I like to have you with me, for I love my Damayanti, dearly."

Now about this time a man of Bidarva, named Sudeh, arrived at Chedi, for when Maharajah Bhimsen had heard of Nal's misfortune with the dice and how, exiled from his kingdom, he had betaken himself into the jungles, and that Damayanti had willingly accompanied him, Bhimsen's heart was sore to think that his beloved daughter should be subjected to a life of poverty and hardship and his kingly soul determined to find the wandering pair and treat Nal as a son. He welcomed his two grand-children and then despatched

At Ajodhya he heard that Maharajah Rituparna wanted a driver for his *rath* (chariot) Nal was a skilful driver and he promptly applied for the situation and got it

In the meantime at Bidarva Damayanti was fretting her heart out for him, and to all her enquiries they continually answered, "No news No one knows whether Nal is dead or alive Try to forget him," and Damayanti would answer, "Forget him! my husband! my Nal! It is impossible, I live only to see him again Were I sure to find him I should follow him through the flaming fire "

One day she looked brighter and some of her girl attendants remarked it and she replied "I have thought of a plan by which I may find Nal and I want your help

The Princess had that morning heard that the Maharajah Rituparna had a new and clever driver, in fact this aged Maharajah's charioteer had become famous for his driving And Damayanti, knowing what a wonderful driver Nal was, decided upon a bold plan which might bring him to her

Her companions declared their willingness to help her, so she informed them that she was thinking of marrying again

"Marrying again!" they cried aghast, "Princess, how can you say anything so terrible "

"I am sorry to displease you," Damayanti answered quite calmly, "but I mean what I say and all of you have just promised to help me " "But", they pleaded, ' it is unheard of for a married lady to marry again "

The Princess laughed happily and said, "Now, my girls, I want no more questions and no interference hut," she added, winningly, "with your kind help, I must find Nal "

The ladies looked at her sad face and tear shadowed eyes They knew that their Princess was a true and devoted wife They pitied her, in her great grief and longed for Maharajah Nal to return So they stilled their anxiety and awaited her wishes She told them that she suspected the wonderful driver, *Bahook* at Ajodhya to be her Nal, and she desired one of them to

acquaint Sudeh of this and to tell him that he must secretly convey an invitation to the old Maharajah Rituparna to come to the Princess Damayanti's *Swayambhara*, which was fixed for a certain day. Her friends declared this to be an excellent plan. There was so little time, and Ajodhya so far away, that the old Maharajah would be obliged to travel very fast and would, of course, need his most skilful driver. The proceedings were to be kept secret from Damayanti's father for fear he should forbid them, but some of the ladies broke the news as gently as they could to her mother. When the Maharani heard of her daughter's extraordinary resolution she was stunned with horror and dismay and too ashamed to tell her husband.

Sudeh journeyed with speed and delivered his message to Maharajah Rituparna. The old Maharajah was overcome with joy to think that he, in his old age, should be honoured with an invitation to the *Swayambhara* of one so young and lovely as the Princess Damayanti. He summoned his charioteer, *Bahook*, and asked him, "How long will it take to go to Bidarva?"

He answered, "Several days."

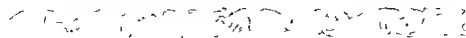
"That won't do," answered the excited Maharajah, "You must get me there to-morrow evening. The beautiful Princess Damayanti is to wed again and I am called to her *Swayambhara*."

"What, what?" cried the disguised Nal, in hoarse and agitated tones, "Damayanti going to marry again?"

Sudeb had been watching the charioteer from the moment he entered the room and his wild agitation, and the free use of the Princess's name betrayed him and Sudeb was convinced that he was none other than the missing Nal. But how terribly changed he was, how disfigured! The eyes alone in their anguished depths revealed the once great and handsome Maharajah of Nishad.

Maharajah Rituparna frowned angrily at his servitor's unusual behaviour and asked severely: "How dare you use the Princess's name? Remember your place."

For a few minutes *Bahook* stood dismayed and troubled, then with an effort he controlled himself and said to his master, "Forgive me, Sir; but it is a



strange thing to hear of Princess by birth and Maharani by marriage marrying a second time "

"It is no concern of yours," the Maharajah answered severely, then added more mildly, "Do you know, this Princess refused four gods and chose a worthless fellow named Nal who gambled away all he had and then deserted his wife in a lonely jungle, where she had accompanied him in his misfortune. Well does she deserve a good husband and I am proud to think that I am bidden to her *Swayambara* "

A faint smile flickered over the driver's face. The thought that this old man fancied he would be chosen by Damayanti amused Nal in spite of his great trouble, but he determined to humour him and reach Bidarva with all speed, so he said respectfully "I shall do my best, Sir, to get you to Bidarva in time for the *Swayambara*, if your Highness will start at once "

Sudeb begged of Maharajah Rituparna that he might accompany him and soon all three started. *Bahook* drove like a fury and they went like lightning through towns and villages. The Maharajah dropped his gold embroidered and jewelled scarf and called to *Bahook* to stop and pick it up.

"Impossible, Sir," the driver shouted back, "We are miles away from it by now "

"Are we really travelling so fast?" asked the Maharajah, while Sudeb, sitting silently beside him, thought "This is surely Nal, only the power of love would dictate such mad speed."

When they reached the capital of Bidarva, Maharajah Rituparna was surprised to find there were no preparations for a *Swayambara* and no other guests at the Palace. But he received a courteous welcome from Bhimsen and was conducted to the Palace. Maharajah Bhimsen, greatly perturbed at his unexpected guest's thanks and talk of a *Swayambara*, hastily sought his wife, who told him the little she knew.

"But where are the other guests?" asked the wonder-struck Bhimsen, "surely Damayanti did not bring poor old Rituparna here to insult him. I don't like it at all. What has come over our Damayanti?"

Bahook had taken the chariot and horses to the stables, relieved to see there was apparently no *darbar*, but longing for news of Damayanti. Sudeb had hastened to the *antapur* and told the Princess of the driver's dismay on hearing that the Princess Damayanti was to marry again. Damayanti quickly called one of her ladies to her and asked her to take the little Prince Indrasen and his sister to the stables to visit the famous driver of Ajodhya. Bahook was pretending to clean the harness but he was miserably absorbed in troubled thought as to how he should act, and did not see the lady and children coming towards him.

"Driver", said the lady, "Our Princess has sent her children to visit the stables to see the horse." He started forward, exclaiming, "How kind of her," and gazing with eager eyes at the lovely girl and boy before him. The lady could see no trace of the handsome Nal in the haggard driver, but the anguish of his eyes touched her heart. "I wonder how your Princess knows I love children," he tried to say lightly but his voice trembled with emotion, and his yearning heart longed to hold his little ones on his knees. "May I take them in my arms?" he asked in a quivering voice. The lady said, "Yes," and he kissed the children again and again, while the tears rolled down his scarred face.

"Why do you weep?" asked the lady-in waiting. "Does it make you unhappy to see our Princess's lovely children?"

"Oh, no, no," he answered, "but they remind me of my own children, who are exactly like them and the same age."

"That is very strange," said the lady. "Do you mean to say your children are exactly like these?"

"They are," he assured her and added sadly, "but I have been separated from them for a long time."

The lady was now certain that this was Nal, but, pretending still to believe he was a charioteer, she said, "Indeed, and how is it you have not seen your children for a long time?"

Nal looked confused, then answered slowly, "They are with their mother in her father's home."

"Why?" asked the lady.

"I am but a poor driver," Nal answered awkwardly, "and have to attend to my work."

"Yes," said the lady, "but even if you are poor and have to work, you must not neglect your wife and children. What is your wife like?"

"She is the most lovely woman on earth," answered the disguised Nal, in loving tones, "and I am not worthy of her."

"You are a cruel husband not to remain with such a good wife," the lady said, severely, and Nal winced. She noticed the anxiety with which he changed the conversation, by asking her, "Fair maiden, is it true your Princess is going to marry again?"

"Why not?" was the crushing reply. "My only wonder is that she waited so long. But why do you ask?"

"Because," said Bahook, "I understand my master has come to attend her *Swayambara*."

"Yes, the Princess herself invited him," said the mischievous girl, determined to hurt Nal's feelings as much as she could, "and she is going to marry again."

He was silent for a moment, then ventured to ask another question, "Is her first husband dead?"

"Do not speak of her first husband," the lady replied in an angry tone, "he is the most cruel of men that ever lived on earth. Would that he had never come into our Princess's life. She is beautiful and young, and he proved himself unworthy of her and treated her shamefully. Had he been my husband"

"Still, he may be alive," the driver ventured to interrupt, but his voice was trembling and his troubled expression and uneasy eyes betrayed his agitation. Off his guard in his distress, he had spoken in his natural voice and the girl felt sure he was Nal. Hardly able to conceal her joy, she told him hastily she must now take the children back to the Palace.

Nal kissed his boy and girl once more and said to them, "Tell the Princess, your kind mother, I am most grateful to her for the great honour she has

bestowed on me in sending you both to the stable "

The lady-in-waiting returned to Damayanti, much relieved to know that the Princess would be happy again at finding her beloved Nal

Next day she came again "Driver," she said sweetly, "our Princess has heard that you cook very well and she will be glad if you will come and cook something for her to day "

Nal's heart leaped with joy So Damayanti sought a sign from him ' He answered eagerly, "With pleasure To cook for your Princess will be a great honour to me " And he followed the lady to the Princess's kitchen and prepared some choice meat curries which were known only to him and Damayanti

When the Princess tasted the curry she cried joyfully to her attendants "I have found Nal ' There is not a doubt that this driver is he! I must go to him at once "

And, dressed in a simple *saree* and with her hair hanging down her back in a single plait to signify that she was *beroohi*, she was prepared to go to the stables Ever since Nal left her she had dressed as *beroohi*, no ornaments, no expensive jewels were ever seen on her, though her parents and friends often begged her to have them

One of the ladies in waiting was sent to inform the driver that the Princess was coming to visit him Nal longed for, yet dreaded the meeting Would she shrink from his disfigured face? Would she scorn him in a position so much beneath him?

When Damayanti stood before him, as sweet and fair looking as before, but with the traces of sadness and suffering written in her lovely face, his heart reproached him for all that his weakness had cost her and in his remorse and humility he thought it better to make her believe he was in reality only an obscure driver So he stood up and, respectfully saluting her, said "Princess, this is a great honour to me and I appreciate it, but I am only a humble driver and you are King Bhunsen's daughter A stable is no place for you You should not have come here to see me "

Damayanti was grieved to see him so scarred and altered and these formal words of his pained her sorely. She knew he was her husband and her suffering heart could bear no more. So, casting herself at her feet, she cried out, "Husband, beloved, he not so cruel. Be yourself. My sufferings have been great, I can bear no more. Have mercy on me."

But Nal behaved in the same strange manner. "Rise, Princess," he said, and, when Damayanti rose to her feet and stood before him, he turned harshly away. The sight of her still wonderful loveliness and the recollection of her sending for the old Maharajah Rituparna pierced his heart with jealousy, and with a heavy and suspicious heart he spoke, forgetting her devotion and self-sacrifice, "I have behaved cruelly to you but my love for you is as strong as ever and so is my jealousy. How am I to know that you have been true to me? You are still beautiful, and what is this talk of Rituparna Maharajah marrying you? I shall disappear and, never come into your life again. Be happy, and marry whomsoever you like."

Damayanti did not answer him but, raising her eyes to heaven, she clasped her slender hands and sobbed aloud, "God, Oh God! help me. Let me prove to my husband how true is my love for him, and that I am a virtuous wife. Angels of mercy hear my cry. Let me die rather than he should doubt my love."

Her anguished prayer had barely ended, when a strain of sweetest harmony filled the air, and angels' voices said, "Nal, take back your wife. She is pure and true. With her is good fortune and happiness." And the gods descended to bless the royal pair, saying to Damayanti, "You are our dear child and we are pleased with you. No more troubles shall assail you." And, to Nal, "Her sufferings have been great but her love and patience have triumphed. It was her strong love which released you from Sam's spell and drew you here to her."

Nal's doubts fled. He fell in worshipping love at his wife's feet. Sweet melody filled the stable and beautiful flowers rained upon them. The court ladies escorted Nal with songs of gladness to the palace, and his son and daughter danced with joy on either side of him. Damayanti's father and mother wel-

comed him, as they had done when he came as a bridegroom with their daughter's garland round his neck. It was their wedding day over again and all Bidarva feasted and rejoiced with Nal and Princess Damayanti.

The old Maharajah Rituparna heard the wonderful story of his driver, *Bahool*, with amazement, and he felt humbled and ashamed that he, an old man, had been foolish enough to think that a young and lovely woman like Damayanti would choose him at a *Suayambara*. But Nal hastened to thank him for his kindness and shelter, assuring him that only through him he, Nal, had been re-united to his wife. So Rituparna returned to Ajodhya pleased and happy, but with a new driver.

Bhimsen insisted that Nal should be to him as a son, and Damayanti and he lived happily together in her childhood's home. The news spread through the land and reached Nishad and many of the subjects longed to see their old Maharajah again.

After a time, Nal sent a messenger to his brother Pushkar, asking his permission (as Maharajah) to live in Nishad. Pushkar replied that he would allow Nal to return if he would promise to play the dice game again, and if he lost he must leave Nishad for ever. Nal agreed, and in the game won back his kingdom.

Then he threw away the dice and embraced his brother. Pushkar lived peacefully at Nishad, for Nal was too generous not to forgive wholly. The people of Nishad rejoiced to have their Maharajah Nal and Maharani amongst them once more, and Damayanti and Nal, secure in the love of children and subjects, lived happily ever after.

There is a little cave near Mount Abu, in Rajputana, called *Nal Guha*, where tradition says Nal and Damayanti lived when in the forest.

Nal's castle of Nishad or Nirwara was taken by Scindhia about 967 A D and Nal's present representative, of direct descent, is a small chief whose estate is near Shahabad in the Central Provinces.

UTTARA

Maharajāh Santanu of Lunar Race (*Chandravansa*), left three sons, when he died. Bhishma was by his first wife, the goddess Ganges. When the goddess left him, Santanu married another wife, who had two sons, named Vichitravirja and Chitrangad. Prince Chitrangad died when young. The heir, Bhishma, vowed, when his father married the second time, that he would be a bachelor all his life. This was because the second Maharani's father was unwilling to marry his daughter to Maharajah Santanu, saying, "As you have an heir already, my daughter's sons would have no claim to the throne."

On hearing this, Prince Bhishma vowed, by all he held sacred, that he would be a *Brahma-chari* (holy man). As he, therefore, could not marry, Prince Bhishma was most anxious that his younger brother, Vichitravirja, should find a suitable wife.

At this time, there reigned in Benares a Maharajah who had two lovely daughters, by his Maharani, and a third daughter, who was also very pretty, by a slave-girl. Prince Bhishma, on hearing of these young Princesses, went to Benares and brought the three girls to his kingdom, Hastinapur. There was a great *darbar* held, to which many guests were invited, including the Sage, Vyasa-deb, and the girls were married to Prince Vichitravirja with great festivities.

The names of the girls were Amba, Ambica and Ambalica. They lived happily for a very short time, and then Prince Vichitravirja died, leaving no heir to the throne. Prince Bhishma was asked by his step-mother to marry, and he said, "No, never, because I promised by all I hold sacred that I would never marry."

"Oh," she said, "dear son, you promised that because of me, as my father thought that my sons would not succeed to the throne, but now there is no heir,

and, unless you marry and have a son, your father's name and the Lunar Race will be extinct."

"Never shall I do it," said Bhishma, "the sun and the moon may disappear, the earth may become a heap of ashes, but Bhishma's promise will remain, and nothing can alter it."

After much lamentation, the step-mother went to the Sage, Vyasa, for advice, and he promised to do his best in the matter. None could tell which of Vichitravirja's three widows was the daughter of the slave-girl, and Vyasa Mooni, having considered the subject, and thinking that nobility of blood would show itself, asked the three Queens to walk before him, unveiled, one by one.

When he asked the first queen, Ambica, she came modestly, with closed eyes, and she gave birth to a son who was blind. Ambalika, the second concealed her face with a coating of *pandu* (yellow ochre), and henceforth was known as *Pandea*, and her son, who was born unnaturally pale, was called Pandu. The youngest widow proved her ignoble birth by stepping forth unashamed. Her son was named Bidoor.

Prince Dhritarashtra was excluded from reigning because of his blindness, and Pandu, the younger son, was given the throne of Hastinapur. King Pandu married Princess Kunti, the aunt of the god Krishna, to whom she was devoted, and she gave her lord three sons, Yudhishthir, Bhishma and Arjun. His younger Maharani had two sons, Nakul and Sahadev. These five Princes were the pupils of Drona, the Master-Archer, and they became famous for their knightly deeds.

On the death of Pandu, Yudhishthir became King, but his cousin, Duryodhan, the first-born of the hundred sons of the blind Prince Dhritarashtra claimed the throne, because his father was the elder son of Vichitravirja. Duryodhan's plots against Yudhishthir caused him and his brothers, who were called Pandavas (sons of Pandu), to seek shelter for a time in the countries beyond the Indus. While living there, Yudhishthir married Draupadi, daughter of the King of Panchalica.

Now, Dhritarashtra, the blind, loved his nephews, and, to end the feud

between them and his sons, he divided the ancient kingdom of Hastinapur. Durjodhan reigned in the old capital, and he and his brothers were known as the Kurus.

Judhisthir founded a new capital at a place called Indraprastha, which had long been famous because, once in the by-gone ages, Indra, the King of the *deities* (gods) had done *pūja* there to Vishnu, and a belief had spread that the souls of those who died on that holy spot would go straight to heaven, and hence Indraprastha had become a place of pilgrimage.

The new capital which Judhisthir built there surpassed Hastinapur in splendour and beauty, and the Pandava inaugurated his reign with the magnificent ceremony of *Rajsuya*. Thousands of guests were invited, and to each of the Princes of India was assigned a special duty, for, in these royal rites, every office was performed by a scion of royal blood. King Durjodhan was given charge of the treasury and Prince Blum, of the food, and so on. Krishna, King of Dwarka, asked Judhisthir to appoint him to wash the feet of the guests. When all were assembled, and the ceremony began with the washing of the hands and feet of the guests, they all cried, in horror, "What! is God Krishna to wash our feet? Why has such a servile duty been given to him?" and Sri-Krishna, the divine King, answered gently, "Yes, I, though God, am the servant of all, and am here to serve you."

The office of distributing the sacred food was the supreme one and had belonged to the Maharajah of Hastinapur for over twenty generations, but now Judhisthir, King of Indraprastha, performed it, and terrible were the rage and jealousy in Durjodhan's heart, when his cousin and rival thus proclaimed his supremacy. Bound by his promise to his father, the enraged Prince could show no open resentment, but his soul burned within him, and he and his brothers plotted for the fall of Judhisthir.

The Pandu King was celebrated for his virtues, and, for a time, Durjodhan chafed in vain for vengeance. Then he bethought him of the game of *pasha* (dice) their national pastime, and he invited Judhisthir to play with him. Judhisthir was a man of high character, truthful, and was

too kind-hearted to refuse Durjodhan's request. Durjodhan lured his cousin on, to higher and higher play, and Judhisthir, who was not good at the game, staked all he possessed, including his kingdom and the liberty of himself, his brothers and his wife.

The conditions of the game were that he who lost should go into exile for twelve years and live in disguise for another year, and, if any one penetrated the disguise, the exile should be extended another twelve years. The Pandavas, all loyal to their brother and King, Judhisthir, prepared to accompany him in his banishment. Arjun had married Subhadra, the only sister of the god Krishna, whose kingdom, Dwaraka, lay in the far lands near the sea. Here Prince Arjun sent his wife and little son, Abhimanuyu.

The brothers, with Draupadi, sought the farewell blessing of their mother, ere they departed to the forest. As each brave son touched her feet, the Maharani Koonti said: "I bless you with my whole heart, that you may often have troubles." But, when Princess Draupadi knelt before her, she said

"Child, you will not forget that all my precious ones, my five dear sons are in your care. Tender them lovingly, my daughter."

Prince Arjun asked, wonderingly: "Mother, how can you wish us often to have troubles in the jungles? Do you not understand what this banishment means? We are leaving everything that is comfortable and pleasant. We go into exile with the knowledge that we have lost all, and yet, over and above this, you, our mother, wish us to have further troubles."

"My dear sons," answered their good mother, "I know you have lost all worldly goods, but God remains, and, if you have frequent troubles, you will not forget him, and they who possess God need nothing more."

Koonti's sons heard her in reverent silence. Then, with Draupadi, they set out for the great forest. Hardships and trials beset them, at every step, but the god Krishna watched over them, and they ever remembered the Divine Presence, and kept their souls in peace.

When the twelve years of exile were ended, the Princess assumed fictitious names and journeyed to the kingdom of Birat, where they obtained service in

different capacities. The Princess Draupadi became a lady-in-waiting and Yudhisthir was employed in the court. Blum served as a cook, Arjun disguised himself as a woman and taught the Maharajah's only daughter, Uttara, dancing and singing, and the two youngest brothers, Nakul and Sahadev, found situations in the royal stables.

Now, the household of Birat Rajah was all joy and happiness and the little Princess Uttara was the pride of the kingdom. Often, her sweet ways as he taught her, made Arjun think with longing of his young son, in distant Dwaraka, and he grew to love his little pupil as a daughter, and she returned her teacher's affection, for her disposition was gentle and loving.

Just as the year of disguise came to its end, the Maharajah of Birat discovered who his unknown servants were, and calling the Princes before him, he asked their pardon for employing them as menials. The brothers, however, thanked him, saying

"We shall never forget all the kindness we have received in your household. God will bless you for your goodness to His servants, the Pandavas."

But King Birat was weighed down with grief that the great Pandu and his noble brothers should have passed a whole year unrecognised and unknown in his palace. Arjun told Yudhisthir that all he had seen, during the year, of Princess Uttara, made him sure that she was a most suitable wife for his son, the lad Abhimanyu. Yudhisthir agreed, and they expressed their wishes to the Birat Maharajah, who said that nothing would give him greater honour and happiness than the union of his daughter with a Prince of the famed house of Pandu. So the wedding day was fixed, and Arjun sent messengers to Dwaraka, to bring his wife, Subhadra, and his son, and all Birat was joyful.

When the bridegroom's party arrived, they were welcomed with music and flowers, and the marriage was celebrated with much feasting. Then the Pandavas left Birat, taking the little bride, Uttara, with them. The parting from her parents and her little brother, Uttar, was a sad one.

The Maharajah and Maharani dearly loved their child, and they gave her many handsome presents, including a number of dolls, for the Princess Uttara

was very young, and knew only the play-side of life. Subhadra soon learned to love her little daughter-in-law, for Uttara's was a beautiful disposition. Arjun and Subhadra shielded her tenderly from every care, and left her free to play. Prince Abhimanyu adored his lovely wife, and often played with her and her dolls. Arjun watched the pretty picture with joy, and, if Uttara wanted a new doll or toy, she had only to ask him and it was hers, immediately.

Now the years of exile were over, and the Pandavas asked Durjodhan to give them a piece of land. Durjodhan answered that if the Pandavas wanted even the smallest piece of Indraprastha, they must fight for it. The Pandavas accordingly took up arms, and declared war upon the Kauravas. Many chiefs and princes of the Royal Races joined, some on one side and some on the other, and thus began the *Kurukshetra*, or Great War of India.

Sad and terrible were the carnage and slaughter. The skies were rent with the clash and clamour of battle. The earth was soaked with the blood of heroes. Friendship was broken, and the ties of blood forgotten! Brother fought against brother, and the son knew not his father, nor the disciple his master! The fair country of India was stricken, and all was chaos and desolation, and the memory of the horror of the War lives in the land to this day.

Pandava and Kuru mothers mourned their sons, and the lamentations of widows pierced heaven itself, and made the angels weep. In the Royal Temple of Mahadev, at Hastinapur, the widowed mother of the Pandu and the aged mother of the Kuru besought God to end the awful destruction and give peace to the country. But neither knew that the other came to the temple to worship.

Koonti Devi had been a devotee of Krishna all her life, and she had taught her five sons to worship him. Krishna and his brother, Baladev, fought on the side of the Pandavas, and she implored Mahadev (their family god) to give them the victory.

But the Queen Gandhari had also gained great favour in heaven, for, when she came from her mountain-home in Kandahar as a bride to the blind King Dhritarashtra, she found him lonely in his affliction, and she loved him so much, that she cried to the gods: "Let me share his blindness." She bandaged

The great War went on, while Uttara played with her toys and was happy. But Abhimanyu chafed for an opportunity to join the fray. Many brave Pandavas had fallen, and, when Abhimanyu heard that Yudhishthir sought a leader for one of his armies, he hurried to his uncle's tent, and, after doing homage at his feet, said

"Revered Majesty, pray send me to the battle field, to day. I know I am young and untried in battle, but am I not the great Arjun's son? I shall put my soul into the fight and, Uncle, you will be proud of my sword this day."

Yudhishthir's heart was heavy. Hundreds of his gallant knights were slain, Arjun was leading a division in a distant part and the King had no General to lead his second army, while the Kurus had seven experienced Generals. He gazed into the fine face of his nephew. He thought of the girl wife, Uttara, and the hopes of his brother Arjun's house, and he felt that he could not accept the sacrifice of another brave life in his cause. So he smiled tenderly on Abhimanyu and said "Child, you are so young, and the Kurus so cruel."

But the lad still knelt at his feet, and answered

"Uncle-King, I beg you let me go. I shall return a conqueror, and, if not, is not Chandra's heaven open to those who die fighting for sovereign and country? Bless me, and send me forth."

Yudhishthir could not resist the ardour of the lad's pleading, and his need of a leader was great, so he yielded. But the tears dimmed his eyes, as he said "Beloved nephew, you are the only knight to whom I can trust my soldiers to day. The Pandavas will be proud to follow such an earnest young General." Then, summoning his council, he appointed Abhimanyu to lead the Pandavas, and the ranks of soldiers gladly welcomed Arjun's brave son.

When Abhimanyu told his mother that he was to act as a General on the battle field that day, she looked sad, and pleaded

"How can I let you go to the cruel Kurukshetra, where so many have been killed? O my son! will you not go and ask your uncle, the Maharajah, to defer sending you till your father comes back?"

But Abhimanyu answered her "Mother, is it not a proud day for you, that

your son has been chosen to lead the Pandava soldiers, and chosen by the great Yudhishthira himself? Dear mother, can anything hurt me? Am I not the famed warrior Arjun's son, nephew of God Krishna? My saintly mother, your prayers will always protect me." And Abhimanyu bent down and touched her feet, in filial farewell.

Suhadra drew him into her arms and kissed him on his forehead saying with gentle resignation: "God be with you, my precious son."

Now a harder task lay before the young Prince, to bid farewell to his wife. As he thought of her, in her delicate state, his heart tightened within him, but he remembered the honour of his kinsmen and all the gallant dead, who had shown him the way to glory. He smiled a brave smile, and raised the curtain of Uttara's room, thinking to find her, as ever, in happy play. But the Princess lay upon a couch, with closed eyes, and hands tightly clasped upon her breast, and tears trickled from underneath her silken eye-lashes. Abhimanyu knelt beside her and tenderly kissed the dainty fingers and asked "My sweet one, why do you weep?"

"I don't know," she answered him, plaintively, "but my right eye is twitching, and they say that is a sign of misfortune."

"My pretty Uttara!" he murmured softly, as he drew her close to his heart, "don't pay any heed to these sayings. I have some news for you. Uncle has appointed me a general, and I am to lead the Pandavas to battle to-day."

His words pierced Uttara's heart, like a dagger, and she fainted upon his breast, and, as he held her there, so pale and lifeless, a strange foreboding gripped his heart. But he put it from him, and brought her back to life with warm caresses, and then she lay like a wounded dove, nestling against him and moaning piteously: "Don't go, don't leave me"

Fighting against his feelings, he answered her, gently:

"Beloved Uttara, Queen of my heart! I must go. I must do my duty for my King. You will love me more, dear one, if I am brave and true, and will you not be proud of me," he asked, cheerfully, bending down, to gaze into her starry eyes, "when I return a conqueror?"

Būt Uttara shivered, in agony, and moaned "This dreadful, cruel war!" and then she raised herself aud, circling her slender arms about his neck, she looked gravely into his face and said

"Husband, beloved, I had a dream last night, and it has made me so miserable I saw you on the battle field The cruel Kurus surrounded you and you fought like a hero, but your sword was cleft in twain and then you prayed the warrior's last prayer to Krishna, and oh my Prince! I saw you fall to the ground, calling for me

The words struck a chill on Abhimanyu's heart and for a space he could find no way to soothe her He had a loving and gentle nature, and could not bear to see anyone suffer, least of all his petted and delicate wife Seeing him silent and sorrowful Uttara, holding his hands tightly within her own, pleaded, urgently 'Don't go, don't go!

"My own, my dearest," he answered, let us not think of the parting, but only of the time when we shall meet again, and how happy we shall then be!"

"Ob, my Prince, joy of my life, I cannot let you go We have just begun our play I like play, but not this dreadful war game It is cruel, and you and I are so young Leave the war game to the others, and stay with me"

Abhimanyu's heart was rent in twain He had a soldier's spirit and duty and loyalty called him and he longed to go But he loved his wife, and her grief weighed heavily upon his soul and, for a while, he again held her to him, and she clung to him and wept

Then he kissed her and said "Uttara be my own bright little Uttara You know I cannot bear to see you weep Be brave, my wife and come and help me dress for battle

Uttara was an obedient wife, and never hurt her husband in any way, and, as she wished to please him, she yielded to his pleading ~ But convulsive sobs still shook her fragile body, and she said "I am so weak and fearful You will be ashamed of me, King of my heart"

"Never ashamed of you, my loved one," he cried and again he caught her in his arms and strained her to his heart, "your cheerful presence, your

bright and child-like ways, have made my life all happiness. But now, another day has dawned, and sterner duties lie before us. Come, my precious love, soul of myself! gird me for the battle. Do you hear the soldiers' shouts? They are ready. } Hasten my going."

The Princess became brave for his sake, and helped him to don his armour. With her tiny fingers, she huddled on his sword and placed his shield in his bands. And her heart swelled with pride, as she looked at him. He was so fine and so handsome, the pride of all his race. Then she called her maidens, to wish him luck, and bravely led them in the *baran* and placed the *jaimala* round his neck, and touched his feet, in farewell, crying bravely:

"My husband, my Prince, don't be away long. I still love my play, but I shall be lonely."

Now he was the weak one, and he strained her to his heart and bent his handsome head, to whisper: "Uttara, my sweet Uttara, don't let my mother weep for me," and, in a louder voice, he said: "Oh, my little wife, you are still a child, go on with your play." And then, again: "I am going to do my duty, Uttara, pray to God for me."

But Uttara could no longer answer and, raising her tear-stained face, he kissed her solemnly, on the forehead, and, holding her hands in his, he prayed. Then he tore himself away, but returned, once more to embrace her, and once more she clung to him in grief and cried out:

"Abhi, Abhi, don't be long! My heart breaks at this parting. I have no strength to bear it. My life is young, my toys are new. I shall wait with patience for your return, Abhi, but don't be long."

Ahlimanyu kissed her face, but did not speak, and then he tore himself away again and left her. A few paces off, he turned and cried. "My Uttara, my beautiful Uttara." Then he mounted his war-chariot and the soldiers shouted, "*Jai! Jai! Abhimanyu-ki Jai!*" and the trampling of the war-elephants shook the earth as they marched away. Uttara watched till she could see him no more, and then crept, like a stricken deer, to her room.

This was her first realisation of trouble. All her life, she had been

sheltered like a choice flower, and, though the storms of earthly sorrows had passed her, they had never touched her. She felt that the sun had ceased to shine for her, and that henceforth her life would be all darkness. Abhimanyu had told her to continue her play, but he, her best and dearest playmate was gone, and a terrible foreboding told her that he would never return.

Uttara stood and gazed sadly at her dolls, and thought of the games she and her lover husband had often played together. Then she remembered his mother, and said, "I shall go to her. He told me not to let her weep." She walked towards the door, but her grief was heavy and she fell lifeless upon the floor. There, her old nurse and foster-mother, Sulochona (the beautiful-eyed) found her and called Subhadra, and for long their efforts to restore her seemed all in vain. At last, the pale eyelids opened, but the great, dark eyes were now lakes of woe and the pretty lips were drawn and drooping, and the plaintive cry, "My love, my Prince, don't leave me," wrung their hearts.

Sulochona wept silent tears to see her dear Uttara so hereft, and she and Subhadra agreed that something must be done to break the stupor of Uttara's grief. Sulochona took the Princess in her arms, and said

"My child, remember that you will be the mother of Abhimanyu's son. What will your lord say, if he finds the little one missing, when he returns?"

The wise words awakened Uttara, and she slowly came back to her senses, and sat at the window to wait for news of the battle.

Abhimanyu led his little army bravely forth, and entered the *buha* (circle of fighting) with the heart of a lion. For a time, he seemed to bear a charmed life, and all fell before him. The dead lay in heaps around him, and his men shouted triumphantly, as they pursued the defeated remnants of the Kuru hosts. Then, the tide of battle turned, and Duryodhan's seven generals strove to win the honour of the day.

Terrible was the slaughter, and at length Abhimanyu alone faced the foe. The seven generals pressed round him, and he fought them single banded. Blood streamed from his face, and his armour was torn and pierced in many places. His sword broke in two, as he cleft a foe in halves, and the seven Kurus,



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taking advantage of it, each shot an arrow at him. Mortally wounded, and attacked by seven, the gallant Prince knew that his last hour had come. Raising his broken sword, he touched his forehead with it, and said his last prayer. Then his fine figure swayed, and he fell to Mother-Earth, with his life-blood fast gushing forth. With his flickering breath, he did homage to his parents, and then, crying, "Uttara, Uttara!" his soul took its flight to Heaven.

Judhisthir, the King, received the cruel tidings with dismay and grief. He knew not how to tell Arjun of Abhimanyu's death. He felt that he had sent the bright and promising youth, the hope of the Pandavas, to his end.

When Arjun returned and heard of his son's death he was over-whelmed with grief and cried out to Krishna, with clasped hands, "Oh Krishna, oh Lord, why hast thou punished me thus? My only joy and only hope is taken away from me. What great fault could I have committed that I should lose Abhimanyu, my beloved child? He was but young and had just begun his life—and so cruelly was he killed! One boy against seven Generals!—where is thy justice, oh, Krishna? How can I go on with the fight now? I feel I have no strength to go on with it. There are many brave soldiers who would fight for Pandavas, but Arjun can do nothing more."

On hearing this, Krishna knew that Arjun was going to give way to his feelings and, if Arjun did not fight, there would be no victory to the Pandavas. Krishna was silent and after a moment Arjun saw a great and alarming vision. In it he saw that the great Creator has the whole Creation in him. He is Life and Death. They were together, Arjun and his son were united in him, and God is the Life. Arjun was frightened, seeing this, and he knew that the Vision was sent to teach him to go on with his duty in the War and not give way to his sorrow.

After getting the news of Abhimanyu's death, Subhadra had entered the room and found poor Uttara on the floor. She sat down gently and placed her dear little daughter-in-law's head on her lap. Uttara opened her eyes and saw her mother and she hid her face in her lap and cried, saying: "Mother, Abhimanyu has gone and will never return," then she fainted, and Subhadra

Debi thought that Uttara was dead. She began to weep and pray to God, "Kind God, have mercy on me, spare little Uttara, that I may have someone to call me 'mother'."

Uttara again opened her eyes and, looking at Subhadra, called out, "Mother, will you not allow me to go with Abhimanyu, to join him in heaven?"

Subhadra Dehi took her little daughter's hands in hers. Her tears rolled down as she said gently, "My child, my lovely daughter, Uttara, be brave. My love for you is greater and stronger than ever, as I see Abhimanyu in you now. Will you not be kind to your poor mother and try and live for her sake a few more years? When our work is done here we shall all go and meet in that *Chandraloke*."

Arjun came to see Uttara, whom he loved like his own daughter, and he sat by her, as she still lay with her head on Subhadra's lap. When he lovingly called her she sat up and said, "Father, father, I have no one to play with now. My playroom is broken up, my toys are smashed, and, oh father, why has Abhimanyu gone, and left me alone?"

Her cry pierced his heart. With great effort he spoke. "My child, you are still young. Why should you not play? Ask me for new toys and I shall get them for you."

"Oh, father, kind father, there is no more play for me," said Uttara. "In this world my play is ended but when I meet my Abhimanyu again, father, will you give me new toys there? You will try and send me to him soon, will you not, father?"

Arjun could not console her, and, shaking with heavy sobs, he walked out of her room.

After a few days Krishna came, as he heard that Uttara was still disconsolate. When he came and stood in the courtyard Uttara was told of his presence. She ran out to him and fell on his feet, saying: "Oh, Krishna, oh, God, Abhimanyu has gone. I want to go, too. No sooner had I begun my play than it was ended. Merciful you are, why did you not let me play on longer?"

They call you merciful. Have mercy on me. Send me to my Abhimanyu. You were his uncle, Arjun was his father, and yet my Abhimanyu has gone!"

She cried piteously. Krishna lifted her and said, with affection "Uttara, dear child, do not be so utterly distressed. Have faith, have strength. We are all under the great Law. We are here for but a few years. Life and Death, sorrow and happiness, go round as the Wheel of the Law. We shall all meet in heaven and you shall go to *Chandraloke* and join Abhimanyu and be happy with him. Before Abhimanyu came to this world he said, in heaven, that he did not wish to remain on earth longer than a few years."

Uttara cried: "I was so happy with him! Oh, Sri-Krishna, you have taken him, take me, too. Let me follow him! I have no child to comfort me."

Krishna, all love and tenderness, said: "Uttara, I shall be your little son, and I shall call you 'mother'. Will that comfort you?"

His words consoled her, and, when Sulochana, the old nurse came in, she found that the Princess Uttara had taken up the broken thread of her life, but never again did she see Uttara playing as before. Instead, she spend long hours in prayer.

One day, catching a reflection of herself in a mirror, Uttara did not know, at first, who it was, for she had never seen herself there since the day Abhimanyu had left her. Now she started back, crying: "Is it a witch?" and recoiled in horror from her own grey hair and sunken eyes and grief-wrecked face. Covering her face in Sulochana's *sari*, she cried: "Mother, do all widows look so terrible?"

Sulochana lifted up her voice and wept, for she loved the Princess as if she were her own child. Then she comforted her, and reminded her of the little one yet to be born. Uttara listened to her words, and gathered strength and courage to bear her loss, and, for her gentle resignation, all who had ever loved her loved still more, and ever loved her more and more, because she carried within her the hope of all Pandu.

When five weary months were passed, her son was born, and Arjun named him Parikshit. After he was born, Uttara besought them all to let her join the

many widows who immolated themselves upon the funeral pyres. But Krishna came to her, and said :

"No, no, Uttara, your son needs your care. A mother with a tender heart must deny herself the comfort of the flaming fire which re-unites her to her lord."

Uttara heard his words, and again resigned herself, with gentle patience, and all who saw her saintly life marvelled. Nor did Krishna forget to comfort his sister, Subhadra, who hid her grief within her heart, and nursed the sick and wounded with so bright a face that all wondered, and, at last, one asked

"For all, mother, that you look so happy, do you not mourn your son?"

And she answered : "Before, I had only one, Abhimanyu, but now I have many, for I see my boy in every wounded soldier."

At last, the cruel *Kurukshetra* ended, and Yudhisthir placed Uttara upon the Imperial throne of Indraprastha, for all his own sons, and I Bhishma's, had gone, and he himself was anxious to journey to the distant snow-capped Himalaya, where he spent his closing years in solitude and prayer. Parikshit and his descendants held the throne of Indraprastha (Delhi) for many years.

Many years, too, had to pass, ere Uttara ascended the longed-for funeral pyre and freed her soul to journey forth to find her lord. Uttara had proved to be the best of mothers. She lived on earth to do her duty to her son. She unselfishly served the throne of Indraprastha, but her suffering and longings for her husband, all the years she lived, were great. She obeyed God Krishna, though ready to embrace death, she lived, instead, a life of death.

To this day, Hindu women, when Uttara's life is spoken of, picture her with her Abhimanyu, as a loving child-wife, playing with her toys.